

"Listen to the Poet"

What Schools Can Learn from a Diverse Spoken Word

Poetry Group in the Urban Southwest

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation shares findings from a yearlong qualitative case study of Young Voices Rise (YVR), a diverse spoken word poetry group in the urban Southwest. The study examined the group's characteristics and practices, adolescent members' views of their writing and themselves as writers, and changes members attributed to their experiences in YVR. Data sources included interviews with six adolescent poets and two adult teaching artists, observations of writing workshops and poetry slams, collection of group announcements through social media, and collection of poems. Sociocultural theory guided the study's design, and grounded theory was used to analyze data. This study found that YVR is a community of practice that offers multiple possibilities for engagement and fosters a safe space for storytelling. The adolescent participants have distinct writing practices and a strong sense of writing self; furthermore, they believe YVR has changed them and their writing. This study has several implications for secondary English language arts. Specifically, it recommends that teachers build safe spaces for storytelling, offer spoken word poetry as an option for exploring various topics and purposes, attend to writers' practices and preferences, encourage authentic participation and identity exploration, and support spoken word poetry school-wide.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Poetry Workshop: “Swinging with a bunch of cats, talking to dogs”**

The teacher begins the poetry workshop at noon. The 23 girls in attendance sit in a circular configuration made up of small café tables pulled together. Several of the teenagers are seated at side tables along the perimeter of the room because the circle of tables is already full.

The teacher, Mark (pseudonyms used for all names), seems to have instant rapport with this ethnically diverse group of adolescents. After spending some time learning their names, Mark launches into a grammar review.

“Who knows what a noun is?” Mark asks. “Person, place, or thing, or idea, right?” They review some examples together, and then he says, “Write those on the top of your paper, so you know what they are.”

“All right, so now I need two verbs. What’s a verb? . . . Yes, my friend? . . . Jump. Jump’s a verb, right?”

“Adjectives. What are adjectives?”

“So what’s going to happen is you’re going to take these words, and you’re going to put them into a series of sentences. This does not have to make sense, okay? It does not have to change the world. It does not matter really. It’s an exercise, okay? So if my words were ‘jump,’ ‘swing,’ ‘cat,’ and ‘dog,’ and my introductory sentence was, ‘Here we go again . . .,’ I’d be like, ‘Here we go again. I’m swinging with a bunch of cats, talking to dogs about’—whatever this one was that I forgot, okay? You feel me? It does not have to

make sense. In fact, the more out there it is, the more entertaining it's going to be, okay? So don't focus on like 'this sounds *stupid*.'" The group laughs as he says this last part with a much too-high voice for effect. They seem at ease with Mark. Everyone writes, and after a minute and a half, eight people volunteer to share what they have written.

After this writing exercise, Mark leads the group in a close reading of a poem by Julie Sheehan. As they discuss the piece, he keeps sending them back to the text, saying, "So what part of the poem, if we can look at the text, what part of the poem—or parts of the poem—tell us like, okay, she really doesn't hate this person? What moment? Try to find it right now."

They discuss some of these moments. Then the instructor shares his own feelings about the piece. Mark says, "The beautiful thing about this wonderful woman named Julie Sheehan is that she's bringing you really close to her world. She's saying, 'While you dig through the cashews, I hate you. My breath says I hate you.' What's really beautiful about this poem is when you read through it, it's like, 'Oh, I know more about her. She's like me. We have this human thing.' She does that by adding details: 'The little blue green speck of sock lint I'm trying to dig from under my third toenail, left toe, hates you.'" The group laughs. "That is detail. That is hilarious. That is what makes it funny."

The writers have 30 minutes to compose poems of their own, using sarcasm as the model text did. Walking among the writers, Mark occasionally shushes those who are off task or stops to help a writer who is stuck. I hear him reassuring someone, saying, "Just explore it. Have fun."

After the 30 minutes are up, 10 people volunteer to read their work. Mark gives them minimal feedback, sometimes simply saying, "Who's next?" The point seems not to

be about critique but about helping these adolescents simply muster the courage to share.

Before the 90-minute session concludes, Mark leaves the group with a personal story and some words of advice. He says, “When I was a young person, I had a lot of . . . issues with anger. I think um maybe the only thing that really helped me negotiate my world, ‘cause it was confusing, um was uh writing. There’s a lot of things you’re not going to have control of. But what’s beautiful about writing, and this is what I want you to remember, is that you can control every single element of what you need to say. And that is one of the things that helped me survive. And I’m not saying it’s going to help you, but I promise you, the more you write and the more you speak, the easier it’s going to be to find who you are and value that thing. Okay? So um, again, thank you. Keep writing, and treat each other well.”

The session ends without a bell, and the writers disperse until 2:00 p.m., when they will have a chance to perform their writing for a larger audience (observation, October 12, 2013).

\* \* \* \* \*

The scene described above could have happened in any number of secondary English classrooms in the United States. A teacher guides his students through a poetry workshop. After they review some of the parts of speech, students brainstorm examples, combine these into lines of poetry, and share these short poems with the class. The teacher breaks the content down into manageable instructional units, and he checks for understanding. In this session, the teacher also has the students read a model text, sends

them back to the text to look for evidence supporting a claim, and has students write their own poem based on this model. This workshop engages students in poetry through close reading, focused writing, careful listening, and frequent sharing. There is a great deal of active participation, and students seem highly motivated to learn and to write.

What is particularly interesting about this scene, however, is that it did not take place in a school; it occurred on a Saturday afternoon at a public library in the Southwest. In other words, the writers participated voluntarily. While the attendees at this workshop happened to all be girls on this particular day, boys did attend at other times, sometimes making up a third of the group. The organization that administers these Saturday workshops and slams is called Young Voices Rise (YVR) (pseudonym used for the group's name), a group that supports spoken word poetry in this community.

### **What Is Spoken Word Poetry?**

Spoken word poetry is meant to be performed. Weiss and Herndon (2001) define spoken word poetry as follows: "Poetry that is written on a page but performed for an audience. Because it is performed, this poetry tends to forefront rhythm, improvisation, free association, rhymes, and the use of hybrid language, from rich poetic phrasing to the gritty imagery of the vernacular" (p. 118). Weiss and Herndon (2001) emphasize the political nature of this type of writing. In fact, they devote an entire chapter to this topic in their spoken word poetry curriculum guide.

An important African-American form, spoken word poetry can be traced back to the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the Black Arts Movement (Lee, 2008). Moreover, the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York has been an important place for poetry slams since

the 1970's. Jocson (2008) discusses some of the ways that spoken word has spread in the decades since, pointing to organizations like Youth Speaks, television shows like *Def Poetry Jam*, and the rise of rap music. Also, Weiss and Herndon (2001) discuss spoken word's relationship to Hip Hop culture. Today, many young people from a range of ethnic backgrounds use this form of writing.

There has been some discussion about spoken word poetry's relationship to more formal forms of poetry. Weiss and Herndon (2001) write, "the boundaries between spoken word and 'serious' poetry are blurry and dubious" (p. 80). Former U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser writes, "More people, huge numbers of people, are following poetry today, poems of every kind, because of the energy overflowing from performance poetry, and that's a good thing for all of us, however you shake it. The really good writing will endure, I believe will all my heart, and the rest of it will be gone with the wind" (2007, p. xix). Spoken word poetry does have a special "energy" as Kooser points out, and others have commented on the liveliness of this art form. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins celebrates the oral component of spoken word poetry, writing, "To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison cell of the page, where silence is enforced" (2003, p. 3). Additionally, James Kass compares today's spoken word poetry to the poetry he experienced as a younger person: "I learned . . . that poetry wasn't necessary . . . [and] was tucked away high up on the dusty shelves. Today's generation of poets and poetry organizations is working to change that" (2003, p. 223).

Of course, oral poetry can be found throughout history. We may read poems like *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* on the page today, but they have a history firmly rooted in oral storytelling. As Richard Prince writes, "The people whom I have seen perform are part of

the old bardic or folk tradition of people gathering to sing, tell stories, and share with words what they think and feel. This tradition encompasses the Homeric epic, medieval ballads, the English broadside, and any culture's folk songs and folktales" (2003, p. 141). Spoken word is part of a long tradition that celebrates oral storytelling.

Today, many organizations are involved in youth poetry outreach, including Youth Speaks, Writers Corp, Poetry Alive, and Young Chicago Authors, just to name a few. Young people from all over the world, including those in the current study, aspire to compete in the Youth Speaks international poetry competition known as Brave New Voices (Youth Speaks, 2014a, 2014b). Several scholars and teachers have discussed this event in detail (Eleveld, 2003, 2007; Jocson, 2011). To get a sense of what is involved in preparing for these types of competitions, the movie *Louder Than a Bomb* (2010, Directed by G. Jacobs & J. Siskel) is enlightening. The movie follows several poets and their teams from across Chicago as they prepare for a citywide poetry slam.

Numerous spoken word poetry performance are available online. For readers who have never heard a spoken word poem performed, the following websites may prove useful:

- "Watch BNV 2014" (Youth Speaks, 2014b) – Footage from the Brave New Voices 2014 competition  
(<http://youthspeaks.org/bravenewvoices/watch-bnv-2014/>).
- "10 Spoken Word Performances, Folded Like Lyrical Origami" (May, 2012) – A collection of spoken word poems  
(<http://blog.ted.com/2012/12/07/10-spoken-word-performances-folded-like-lyrical-origami/>).

- “15 Videos That Will Make You Rethink Everything” (S. Williams, 2013) – Another collection of spoken word poems (<http://www.care2.com/causes/15-videos-that-will-make-you-rethink-everything.html>).
- Taylor Mali’s “What Teachers Make” (Moody, 2006) – This video has had over five million hits and is a favorite of many teachers (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxsOVK4syxU>).

As these websites demonstrate, the medium of spoken word poetry can be used to address just about any topic: gender, race, sexuality, class, family, education, beauty, love, loss, religion, discrimination, abuse, etc. Because of this versatility, spoken word poetry is a form that many adolescents appreciate. Through it, they are able to work through challenges and envision new possibilities for their lives. Also, they can share these poems with a real audience, connect with others, and receive feedback on their work through snaps, claps, comments, and cheers. For a discussion of poetry slams, see the work of Marc Smith (2003).

For teachers and teacher educators, there are many spoken word poetry resources available. Sitomer and Cirelli’s (2004) *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics* includes poetry exercises, model poems of various styles, and instructions for hosting a poetry slam. Also, *The Spoken Word Revolution* (Eleveld, 2003) and *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* (Eleveld, 2007) provide countless examples of spoken word poems, and each of these books comes with a CD as well. The poetry organization Youth Speaks has put out its own curriculum guide entitled *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry* (Weiss & Herndon, 2001). This guide includes five weeks



of lessons and directions for hosting a poetry slam.

Studies of spoken word poetry programming may also be of interest to teacher educators and scholars. For example, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (Fisher, 2007b) discusses a spoken word poetry group at a high school in New York. Another text, *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* (Jocson, 2008), examines how secondary students in California responded to the Poetry for the People program. (See Chapter 2 for a more extensive review of the literature.)

### **Young Voices Rise (YVR): “Empowering youth”**

Young Voices Rise (YVR), the group that is the focus of this study, is a community organization for youth spoken word poets in the Southwest. The adult co-founders and group leaders are Gabriel and Mark, who are both spoken word poets themselves and best friends. YVR began as a high school club that Mark oversaw back in 2008. It then took on a life of its own as a community literacy organization, which would meet in a room in an art museum. Eventually the group began holding events in the library where it currently meets. Gabriel came on board in late 2011, after a student had just named the group, and Gabriel worked to give the group an online presence, a logo, and more attention to marketing overall. The two men handle different aspects of YVR. Sometimes one of them will lead a workshop and the other lead a slam, or Gabriel may lead both events on a given day.

During the 2013-2014 season, YVR met at a public library about once a month. Their writing workshops typically ran from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m., and slams ran from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Poets usually stayed for both events; however, additional people would show

up for the slam, such as friends, teachers, YVR teaching artists, family members, and community members. While a workshop might attract 25 young writers, slams typically attracted 60 or more audience members.

Most of the young people who show up to Saturday events have heard about them through the poetry clubs at their schools. YVR is active in at least 10 schools across the metropolitan area, and Mark and Gabriel receive some funding for this work through arts organizations. However, they do not receive any compensation for the Saturday workshops and slams they work.

Teaching artists, such as Mark, Gabriel, and others, visit the school poetry clubs to help members with their writing. The Town Slam, a two-day workshop and competition, is held in the fall and serves to bring poets together from these various clubs around town. YVR's Saturday events at the library offer an additional way to bring together these poetry club members. However, library events are public, so they are open to anyone who wishes to attend. Sometimes people who just happen to be in the library at that time will drop by. Also, YVR sometimes does workshops in conjunction with a local non-profit that provides art education to kids in Child Protective Services, and sometimes these young people come to the library events. YVR's partnerships with schools and other community organizations seem to expand each year, and the group present at workshops and slams throughout the 2013-2014 season steadily grew. (While the current study focuses on YVR's public events, which bring together a very diverse group of young people and adult supporters from around the metropolitan area, a follow-up study in spring 2015 is examining the practices of an extracurricular high school poetry club that feeds into this organization.)

Gabriel describes his role in YVR as follows: “I run the day-to-day operations. I’m really the one that’s invested in developing the sustainable foundation for us” (interview, June 5, 2014). He is the executive director of YVR, and some of his duties include writing grants, meeting with arts organizations, teaching in school poetry clubs, and running Saturday events. He was present at 12 of the 13 events I attended during the 2013-2014 season, teaching writing workshops, hosting poetry slams, or in one case, attending as an audience member because he had just returned from teaching poetry workshops in a neighboring state. Gabriel is 34. He said he has a White mother and a Puerto Rican father, and he identifies as White. He is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in performance and movement at a university and is employed by his department as a student worker.

Mark, the other group leader, describes his role in YVR as follows: “I develop all of the curriculum. I run most of the [school] workshops, and I develop teaching artists. So I do trainings for the teaching artists, and I’m writing all of the curriculum and the theory behind what we do and how we approach working with young people. So I have the most to say, probably, about how the programs will go down each year” (interview, June 24, 2014). Like Gabriel, Mark teaches in the poetry clubs that take place on high school campuses around town. However, Mark often has to miss YVR events held at the library on Saturdays because he has paid work as a teaching artist elsewhere. Specifically, he took on a leadership role at only 5 of the 13 events I attended. While Gabriel is a good poet, Mark really is a rising star in the spoken word community. He has qualified for and competed in national and international poetry slams, and his poems are on a different level than those of the other adults who share their work in this space. Recently Mark

released a mix tape and music video, securing funding for these projects through Kickstarter. He is 27 years old. Mark said he is the son of a Chicana mother and a White father, and he identifies as Chicano. Both of Mark's parents hold doctoral degrees, and Mark has a bachelor's degree in creative writing. He has self-published a book of poems and is respected in the group as a great artist.

On the group's Facebook page, YVR describes itself in the following way:

*Note: Text is reproduced here without editing.*

*Also, brackets are used to indicate the researcher's masking  
of identifying information.*

[YVR] is an organization of young adults and mentors dedicated to empowering youth through civic service, youth development, and the art of writing and performing poetry.

[YVR] hosts a bi-monthly poetry event for youth poets at the [name of library] in [name of city] off of [names of cross streets]. The Event is from 3-5pm Parents, teachers, and adults are encouraged to attend but preference for seating and participation is given to youth poets first. This even is uncensored and may include some adult language.

[YVR] selects a number of members to compete at Brave New Voices. (online post, retrieved May 23, 2014)

This section of their Facebook page has not been updated for some time. The information about Saturday events—including times and frequency—actually reflects the previous year's schedule.

In an interview with Gabriel, I asked him to tell me about the mission of YVR. He described the group's goals as follows:

Well, our mission is . . . to create a safe space for young people to find their voice through spoken word poetry in an effort to combat illiteracy and silence but also to help empower these young people to be productive and caring citizens of the world. So it's twofold. It's humanitarian, become productive and caring citizens of the world through the development of emotional and cultural literacy. And then the other side is the academic side where it's like we are fighting illiteracy, but also and that's where again, cultural literacy is very important because whose stories are being told, you know? (interview, June 5, 2014)

YVR attempts to help young people develop their literacy skills, empathy, and voice.

Gabriel is concerned that the voices of young people are silenced in our culture, and YVR must work to remedy that:

Our focus, it's, we're not looking for one specific kind of youth, one demographic. It's open to anybody. But what you find in these spaces is the young people and the people who come to these spaces are ones whose voices are marginalized. Their stories aren't being told. Their narratives aren't being told, or they're being told through one particular lens, a stereotypical lens. So it really is about de-marginalizing these voices and

these young people. I think it doesn't matter what your gender or ethnicity or race is. I think as young people, you are automatically marginalized because you're a young person. What you have to say isn't important. How could you possibly have anything important to say? You're a young person. You know nothing yet. And I wholeheartedly disagree with that. I think to have a healthy world, you have to be able to listen to everybody's story. (interview, June 5, 2014)

As Gabriel makes clear, YVR is a spoken word poetry group, but it does much more than teach writing skills. It helps writers develop as people. The group is also concerned with correcting social injustices, and this begins with giving young people space and support to speak out.

### **Understanding YVR Within Its Geographical and Political Contexts**

YVR operates in an interesting, under-researched, and ever-changing place. The sprawling metropolis in the Southwest stretches for miles in most directions, a land of concrete, desert, and golf resorts. The main city is one of the fastest growing in the United States, barely recognizable from the farming area it was in the previous century. The days are mostly sunny with occasional downpours or dust storms. In the summer months, the heat is unbearable. Winter visitors are long gone by then, and residents plan their moves from one air-conditioned space to another.

The library where YVR events take place is located in the center of this metropolis, and it has a distinctly urban feel. A light rail stops in front of the library, and skyscrapers are visible around town. People are out walking, waiting along bus routes

and rail lines, and getting around on their bikes. After I pull off the freeway and make my way toward the library, I see two police officers talking to a homeless person. I drive down a road that alternates between five and six lanes across, and I pass a hospital, medical and surgical out-patient facilities, fast food restaurants, a large grocery store and smaller ethnic groceries and restaurants, charter high schools, strip clubs, a beauty college, a uniform supply store, and loan stores. Some buildings have large, colorful murals painted on the sides. I pass a car wash, a hotel, a coffee shop, and a funeral home, and I see a steeple off in the distance. A resource center for women is close by, as are other community outreach groups like Big Brothers Big Sisters and a branch of the Department of Economic Security. I see just one vacant lot. This area is part of an arts district, which includes a high school for the arts, a major art museum, a theatre, and a city center for the arts, among other arts establishments.

For the largest city in this metropolitan area, census figures show the following breakdown in demographics:

Black or African American alone	6.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	2.2%
Asian alone	3.2%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander alone	.2%
Two or more races	3.6%
Hispanic or Latino	40.8%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	46.5%
Foreign born persons 2008-2012	20.6%
Language other than English spoken at home, Age 5+	36.5%

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2014)

As the data show, the Hispanic and Latino population in this town is significant.

Additionally, in many homes, a language other than English is used.

The political situation in this part of the country often feels less than progressive, almost stuck in time. A sheriff, who continues to be reelected, is infamous in national news for discriminatory practices. Recently a Black professor at a university in this region received nine months of probation for resisting “unlawful” arrest when she was stopped for crossing a street and would not show identification. Several controversial bills have passed through the legislature in this region, including a bill believed by many to encourage racial profiling (parts of it were overturned in the courts), a second bill believed to encourage discrimination against gays and lesbians (the governor vetoed it), and a third bill that banned the teaching of ethnic studies. This legislation, even when parts have been overturned, has rattled many young members of YVR. Themes of racial equality, sexual orientation, and ethnic pride present in their poems need to be understood as occurring in conversation with the unique geographical and political context in which these writers live. In a place where young people of color often feel marginalized, YVR offers a safe space for these voices to be heard. Representing multiple ethnicities, backgrounds, and experiences, YVR poets and their fans come together to support each other.

### **Study Parameters**

Taking this unique context into account, this study pursues the following research questions:



1. What are the characteristics and practices of Young Voices Rise (YVR), a group of spoken word poets in the urban Southwest?
2. How do adolescent members of this group view their writing and themselves as writers?
3. What changes—personal or writing-related—do adolescent writers attribute to their experiences in YVR? What changes have others (e.g., fellow adolescent members, teaching artists, the researcher) noticed in these writers?

I employed qualitative case study methodology in this yearlong study to answer these research questions.

To engage with the multiple perspectives present in this space, I collected data from different sources. Throughout the 2013-2014 season, I observed YVR's writing workshops, poetry slams, and other events. At 11 events, I wrote field notes, took pictures, and used audio- and video-recording. To better understand the young poets in YVR, I interviewed several adolescents—Shawna, Jorge, Rafael, Nicole, Jasmine, and Stacey—multiple times, for a total of 14 interviews. I also interviewed Gabriel and Mark separately, so I could learn about the group from those who founded it. Finally, I collected Facebook posts throughout the season to understand how leaders maintain and extend YVR in an online space. (Specific details about data collection and analysis are discussed in Chapter 3. Findings about the group and adolescent members are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. Implications are presented in Chapter 6.)

### **Looking at YVR Through Multiple Lenses**

Multiple lenses are necessary for understanding the workings of YVR as well as

the young writers affiliated with this group. Sociocultural theory (Goncu & Gauvain, 2012; Prior, 2006), which highlights the socially situated nature of literacy learning, is a useful perspective for better understanding the ways that poets work together in a community space. In particular, the concept of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) can shed light on the organizational features of a group of people learning together. As Wenger writes, “The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (1998, p. 83). Viewing YVR as a community of practice draws attention to shared resources, different forms of participation, histories of learning, boundaries, trajectories, identity formation, and other features common to a community of practice.

Another key concept shaping this study is the idea of “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992). Moll and colleagues describe funds of knowledge as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (1992, p. 133). They also point out that seeing students’ out-of-school lives from a funds of knowledge perspective “contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually” (1992, p. 134). Young writers are, in fact, bringing a range of different experiences and types of knowledge into the YVR space. Not only are the experiences members bring to the group valuable “funds of knowledge” that can be further explored through poetry, but the writers also emerge from the experience with new knowledge about writing, speaking, and performing.

### **Purpose for This Study: “Listen to the poet”**

One purpose of this study is to provide a counter-narrative to widely circled stories about the failures of diverse adolescents living in urban areas of the Southwest (Homeroom, n.d.; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2004). The writers in this study craft spoken word poems on their own time and perform them for large crowds. They engage in literacy practices by their choice and are valued writers in this group.

Another purpose of this study is to offer insight into the writing lives of adolescent spoken word poets in the urban Southwest so that schools can become more responsive to students. After all, the writing practices that young people engage in outside of school are not always recognized or valued in schools. This study seeks to bring youth poets’ practices to light. Many features of YVR could be used in schools to support writers and make education more relevant for adolescents.

In YVR, there is a phrase that is sometimes used: “Listen to the poet.” At poetry slams, judges who do not know the performers—and who are sometimes unfamiliar with spoken word poetry altogether—are called in to assign scores to each poem. It is the audience’s job to try to let the judges know when they have made a bad call. They can do this by booing or yelling out complaints. One phrase the audience might use is, “Listen to the poet,” which means that the scores indicate the judges did not do a good job of understanding what the poet was saying. The judges undervalued the poem and therefore disrespected the poet.

I have chosen “Listen to the Poet” as the main title for this work because young people are out there spitting their poems, sharing their stories. Students from diverse

backgrounds are engaging in literacy practices on their own time, creating powerful writing on their own terms. In contrast to narratives of diverse urban youth underperforming in school because of deficits of some sort, this study suggests that schools and policymakers are failing to acknowledge and value the literacy practices that young people participate in with great dedication. In discussions of school reform, where are these voices, the voices of the poets?

Each week, brave young voices are speaking out at writing workshops and poetry slams all over the United States.

Are we listening?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter outlines some of the theoretical ideas that are relevant to this study of a spoken word poetry group in the urban Southwest. It also traces some of the developments in literacy and writing research that have helped shape the current study, including research conducted with spoken word poets. The following areas are discussed: (1) Sociocultural theory, (2) Literacy and writing research using a sociocultural lens, (3) Youth literacies and spoken word poetry, and (4) Additional considerations in studying youth writers.

Merriam (2009) writes, “All investigations are informed by some discipline-specific theoretical framework that enables us to focus our inquiry and interpret the data. However, this framework is not tested deductively as it might be in an experiment; rather the framework is informed by what we inductively learn in the field” (p. 16). I initially approached this study using a very general sociocultural perspective rather than imposing any one particular aspect (e.g., sponsorship) on all research questions, interview protocol, analysis, etc. Yin (2006) writes that researchers must determine “whether or not to use *theory development* to select [their] case(s), to develop [their] data collection protocol, and to organize [their] initial data analysis strategies” (p. 114, emphasis in original) and warns that aligning oneself too closely to a particular theory “could limit [one’s] ability to make discoveries” (p. 114). In other words, if researchers are focused too much on seeing things through one lens, they may miss much of what is happening in a space. Below, I discuss key concepts that are relevant to this study of a spoken word poetry group in the

urban Southwest.

### **Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural theory (Goncu & Gauvain, 2012; Prior, 2006; Schunk, 2012; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995) is widely used in literacy studies for its emphasis on the social nature of learning. As Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argued, all learning is, on some level, socially mediated (see also Smagorinsky, 2013; Wertsch, 1988, 1993). Applying sociocultural theory to a study of a spoken word poetry group highlights the social exchanges involved. For example, young writers may teach each other techniques, share tools, write works together, adjust their writing based on audience feedback, or write in response to others. Even for the author working independently, the tools already exist elsewhere—albeit, in some other form or combination. From pre-existing building blocks, including a socially constructed language (Bakhtin, 1986; Volosniiov, 1973), the writer creates something “new.” Using a sociocultural framework for this study can reveal how socially mediated tools and processes support writers.

Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986) made important contributions to sociocultural theory, especially in terms of the relationship between social context and learning and development. Instead of seeing learning as happening *despite* social factors, Vygotsky saw learning as *dependent* on them. Challenging Piaget’s (1932) *The Language and Thought of the Child*, Vygotsky argued, “Piaget does not see a child as a part of the social whole. Social factors are shown as an external force that enters the child’s mind and dislodges the forms of thinking inherent in the child’s intelligence” (1986, p. 45). Claiming that Piaget viewed “social factors . . . as an external, ‘alien’ force” (Vygotsky,

1986, p. 44), Vygotsky countered that social factors make vital contributions to learning and development. He suggested, “Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Vygotsky recognized the relationship between the social world and the child’s development.

### *Zone of Proximal Development*

Central to Vygotsky’s theory is the notion of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which he defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level . . . and the level of potential” (1978, p. 86). The ZPD depends on a more experienced teacher or peer to lift the learner to a higher level. Vygotsky argued that play serves a similar function for small children: “a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality” (1978, p. 100). Even for the child playing independently, social influences are ever present. One has only to observe a five-year-old child imitating the speech and gestures of his or her teacher, for example, to understand the sociocultural elements at work during a child’s independent play. For the purposes of the current study, these zones are apparent when adult group leaders coach younger writers or even when a more experienced adolescent poet mentors a less experienced peer.

### *Utterances in Conversation*

Also focusing on social interaction, Volosinov (1973) argued that “language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers” (p. 98). Similarly, Bakhtin (1986) used the metaphor of communication as links in a chain. He argued that utterances occur within larger conversations: “Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another . . . , [and] each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication” (p. 91). Bakhtin also considered printed text as situated within a conversation; in fact, he claimed that a book is a “verbal performance in print” (1986, p. 95). These scholars posited that language and communication depend on others. Utterances occur within social and cultural contexts.

### *Activity Theory*

Another advancement in sociocultural theory that is relevant for the current study is the development of “activity theory” by Leont’ev, one of Vygotsky’s colleagues. Activity theory (Cole, 1996; Daniels, 2004; Engestrom, 2000; Leont’ev, 1981; Roth & Lee, 2007) draws attention to the participants, tools, and artifacts involved in an activity: “According to Leont’ev, human development is a process of development of consciousness as a function of participation in activity. Through the use of tools that mediate the individuals’ interactions with one another and with objects, members of a community both appropriate the skills needed in accomplishing the job and construct awareness about them” (Goncu & Gauvain, 2012, p. 135). Whereas Leont’ev focused on the activity as the unit to be studied, later scholars including Engestrom and Cole



envisioned larger activity systems (Prior, 2006). Focusing on activities and activity systems can lead to new insights regarding how learning happens with others. Studying the artifacts (Diaz-Kommonen, 2004; Sfard & McClain, 2002) in use within these systems can also help researchers see literacy learning in a new light.

Roth and Lee (2007) have demonstrated how activity theory can focus attention on motivation, emotion, and identity. They write, “Identity is evidently a dialectical feature: It is continuously produced and reproduced in practical activity, which both presupposes and produces identity (Roth, Tobin, Elmesky, et al., 2004)” (pp. 215-216). Hayes (2006) has made a good case for using activity theory in studies of writing. After all, activity theory provides a valuable framework for thinking about the people and tools involved in an activity as well as the larger systems within which activities are housed. Activity theory emphasizes tools, subjects, objects, motives, rules, norms, community, outcomes, and divisions of labor.

### *Communities of Practice*

Closely related to activity theory is the concept of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), which offers a useful framework for understanding the features of a spoken word poetry group. Communities of learners gathered around a common practice may share resources, histories of learning, and a sense of identity. Furthermore, members of different ages and backgrounds may interact, and they may participate in different ways. Specifically, “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) may be at work in these groups, meaning that novices participate at the margins before moving toward more

central forms of participation in the group. For spoken word poets, this would indicate that different forms of participation are possible. For example, novices might choose not to perform. More advanced poets may take on leadership roles, mentoring younger poets and eventually becoming teaching artists themselves.

This development in sociocultural theory involves a turn to particular communities of learners, understanding that social and cultural contexts influence the work produced within them. Studying communities of practice and “affinity groups” (Gee, 2004), can reveal how learning happens when people gather around a shared practice or interest. Learning within communities can be explored on personal, interpersonal, and community levels and sometimes involves “participatory appropriation,” “guided participation,” and “apprenticeship” (Rogoff, 1995). As Lave and Wenger (1991) assert: “Learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (p. 31), which is a concept that has been explored in classroom research as well (Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

Of course, socially mediated learning does not always have to depend on the physical presence of others. It can occur across time and space, with creative people looking to the past for mentors, as Rogoff (1990) and John-Steiner (1997) have argued. “Exceptionally creative writers, painters, and physicists discover their own teachers from the past” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 198). Learning with others can take a variety of forms.

As the developments in this section demonstrate, sociocultural theory has taken many twists and turns, but it always focuses on the social nature of learning. In the current study of a spoken word poetry group, sociocultural theory draws attention to the learning community as well as to shared tools, goals, and activities. I found that having a

general sociocultural stance and remaining open to the ways learning was happening within YVR meant that I could focus on applying specific sociocultural constructs only after getting to know the group.

## **Literacy and Writing Research Using a Sociocultural Lens**

Sociocultural theory has been applied to literacy and writing research in many different ways over the last several decades. This section traces some of these developments.

### *Sociocultural Theory in Literacy Research*

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983) transformed literacy studies. Heath's ethnography, conducted from 1969 to 1978, discusses three groups of families living in the Piedmont Carolinas. The families were from Roadville, a White working-class community, and Trackton, a Black working-class community. Additionally, Heath discusses the townspeople, who are White and Black professionals. Heath found that all three of these groups had different ways with words, resulting in varying levels of academic preparedness and advantage as their children entered school. She writes:

Townspeople, like Roadvillers, prepare for, tend, talk to, and play with their children. They teach them to label items and events, to describe their features, to read books, and to play with educational toys. But beyond these aspects of language socialization, townspeople also immerse their children in an environment of repetitive, redundant, and internally

consistent running narratives on items and events. They draw from fantasy books and their own imagination to read, perform, and create stories with their children. They link items in one setting to items in another. . . . Once their children enter school, they continue the early pattern of stress on individual achievement—in sports, extracurricular activities, and academic work. (1983, p. 350)

Heath discovered some similarities in the Townspeople's and Roadvillers' ways with words; however, there were also stark differences. Roadville children were less likely to observe their parents reading for pleasure. By the time Roadville children entered school, their parents backed off, trusting the school system to take over.

While Trackton parents also trusted the school system to take over for them, there are important differences between Trackton and Roadville families. Their children experienced different ways with words. Unlike Roadville children, Trackton children grew up in a rich storytelling tradition that encouraged the use of hyperbole, irony, word play, metaphor, and allusion. At the same time:

No one lifts labels and features out of their contexts for explication; no one requests repetitions from Trackton children. Thus their entry into a classroom which depends on responses based on lifting items and events out of context is a shock. Their abilities to contextualize, to remember what may seem to the teacher to be an unrelated event as similar to another, to link seemingly disparate factors in their explanations, and to create highly imaginative stories are suppressed in the classroom. (1983, p. 353)

In *Ways with Words*, Heath demonstrates practical ways that schools can accommodate these differences in students' backgrounds. For example, she suggests audio-recording students' stories before the teacher types them, using hands-on projects, sending students out into their communities for knowledge, bringing members of the community into schools, comparing folk and scientific knowledge, talking about talk, and encouraging the use of journals. In this key text, Heath proves that students' home and community spheres result in varying levels of preparedness for school. She concludes by arguing that if schools do not change, then "the schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life" (p. 369). In other words, schools have a responsibility to adapt to multiple ways with words. Heath's ethnography continues to be relevant in literacy studies to this day, influencing research on class, race, family, and community (Lareau, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

Brian Street's (1984) study of literacy practices in Iran in the 1970s has also made important contributions to literacy studies. As outlined in his book, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Street's research emphasizes the relationship between culture and specific types of literacies. For example, Street demonstrates that "maktab" literacy—which he defines as "the traditional, religious literacy as taught in an Islamic school" (1984, p. 130)—offers a certain way of viewing the world:

The men who had attended the "maktab" were particularly eager to argue about and discuss these issues. They held a regular round of dinner meetings at their houses to which one of the mullahs would be invited and at which they both recited from sacred texts and discussed commentaries

and their application to current circumstances. . . . Many of their pronouncements of “belief” stemmed from such meetings which were, in a sense, a continuation of the “maktab” tradition in which they had been trained. (1984, p. 148)

Street shows that literacy practices are tied to particular social and cultural contexts. In addition, the practices gained in one context may shape practices in another.

Street also demonstrates in this work that literacy practices “should not be seen as ‘fixed’ or ‘frozen’ but rather as socially contingent and changeable, a product of specific political and ideological conditions” (1984, p. 144). Demonstrating the malleability of literacy, Street shows how in some regions the “maktab” literacy transformed into “commercial literacy.” Street writes:

This basis in “maktab” literacy . . . facilitated the development of a new “commercial” literacy practice and associated skills. It was the presence of this practice and these skills, together with the advantages given by the organisation of small-holdings and the distribution system, that enabled the mountain economy to “take off” in a way that did not happen in plains villages in the same area. The contrast between mountain and plains villages, then, helps to clarify what is meant by saying that literacy is an “enabling” rather than a “causal” factor. “Maktab” literacy in Cheshmeh facilitated the development of “commercial” literacy and “commercial” literacy “enabled” economic growth. (1984, p. 159)

Street’s research reveals that literacies are not stagnant. They can grow and change in order to serve people’s needs.

A second study by Street can be read as a response to Heath's *Ways with Words*. While Heath's ethnography focused primarily on two working class groups, Street examined literacy practices of those in an upper-middle-class suburb. Working with Joanna Street, Brian Street sought to understand "Why and how [the school version of literacy] is reproduced and sustained in contemporary society" (1995, p. 112). They documented literacy practices of students in first and fifth grades, interviewed teachers and parents, and asked parents to keep "literacy diaries" and make recordings of literacy occurrences outside of school. They found that:

the conception of literacy associated with schooling and pedagogy, in particular the emphasis on Teaching and Learning, is transforming the rich variety of literacy practices evident in community literacies into a single, homogenized practice. Mothers and children in the home adopt the roles of teachers and learners; a toy is treated not as a source of 'play', to be used according to the cultural conventions associated with leisure, relaxation, childhood, and so on, but instead is located within a framework of teaching and learning, scaffolding the child to future academic achievement. (1995, pp. 123-124)

School literacies are reinforced in these upper-middle-class suburban homes. Street and Street also point out that rather than school literacy affecting home literacy, another influence may be at work on both: discourses of nationalism. People may be reluctant to challenge traditional notions of literacy, buying into the idea that certain core knowledge is necessary for literacy (Hirsch, 1987). Of course, "official knowledge" is based on "some group's vision of legitimate knowledge" (Apple, 1993, p. 222). It is knowledge

that privileges certain groups and marginalizes others.

Street (1995) contends that subsequent research will “find forms of resistance and alternative literacies alongside ‘school literacy’” (p. 124) even though unofficial literacies have traditionally been “marginalized against the standard of schooled literacy” (p. 128). The current study of a spoken word poetry group responds to these scholars’ calls for recognizing resistance and alternative literacies.

The work of scholars like Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street helped to usher in the “New Literacy Studies” movement of the 1980’s. This movement brought with it the understanding that there are multiple ways to be literate, in some ways challenging the oral-versus-written debate in literacy studies (Collins & Blot, 2003; Gee, 2012). Heath’s and Street’s work demonstrates that particular literacies are valued in particular situations. Their research using sociocultural perspectives helped to pave the way for later studies of literacy in homes and communities.

### *Sociocultural Theory and Writing Research*

Sociocultural theory has proved useful for scholars studying writing research in particular. In a discussion of sociocultural theory and writing research, Prior (2006) argues that all writing is mediated:

Writing involves dialogic processes of invention. Texts, as artifacts-in-activity, and the inscription of linguistic signs in some medium are parts of streams of mediated, distributed, and multimodal activity. Even a lone writer is using an array of sociohistorically provided resources (languages, genres, knowledge, motives, technologies of inscription and distribution)



that extend beyond the moment of transcription and that cross modes and media (reading, writing, talk, visual representation, material objectification). Texts and moments of inscription are no more autonomous than the spray thrown up by the white water in a river, and like that spray, literate acts today are far downstream from their sociohistoric origins. Seeing writing as distributed and mediated means recognizing that all writing is collaborative, involving divisions of labor and forms of coauthorship. (Prior, 2006, p. 58)

In this passage, Prior gives us much to consider. He articulates some of the key contributions of sociocultural theory to writing research: (1) Writing is never a solitary act, even if it appears so. (2) Writing results in artifacts that encapsulate culture. (3) Resources for writing derive from multiple literacies and ways of knowing. (4) Although the act of writing happens in measurable units of time, the influences and experiences that culminate in that writing stretch back into the writer's past—and even into the history of his or her culture. In fact, focusing on this last issue of time, Burgess and Ivancic (2010) point out that notions of the future also affect how writers write. Writers consider future contexts in which their work will be read.

### *Sponsorship*

Sociocultural theory has also contributed to the concept of sponsorship in literacy and writing research. Brandt (2001) explored the role of literacy in the lives of people born between the years 1895 and 1985. Her work looks at how people and institutions act as sponsors of literacy development. Explaining the term in greater detail, Brandt (2001)

writes:

Intuitively, sponsors seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. (p. 19)

In the poetry group in the current study, Gabriel and Mark, who are actually accomplished poets themselves, are important sponsors for adolescent members. Young poets' other sponsors include other adult teaching artists associated with YVR, teachers, family members, and friends.

Related to this idea of sponsorship, sometimes writers are said to engage in "self-sponsorship" (Abbott, 2000; Hudson, 1986, 1988) when they are the ones who are sponsoring their work. Abbott (2000) found that "self-sponsored writing at home featured a wider range of audiences, purposes for writing, and genre than both assigned and self-sponsored writing at school" (p. 56). She also found that some of the work described as self-sponsored actually originated in school as work assigned by teachers. The idea of self-sponsorship is influential for this study because it suggests that adolescents' poems could differ quite a bit in school and out-of-school contexts. After all, the two spaces

likely demand different topics, formats, and audiences. At the same time, there are probably some interesting overlaps.

### *Social Worlds*

In addition to sponsorship, all manner of relationships can influence literacy learning. In their study of the literacy practices of boys, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) found that the social world was very much a part of participants' literate lives. Specifically, participants seemed to value relationships with friends, family, classmates, authors/characters, and teachers. Although their study focused on examining boys' literacy practices through Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1996) notion of *flow* (i.e., intense, focused engagement in an activity), Smith and Wilhelm found that social elements could not be ignored in their study of literacy learning.

### *Popular Culture*

Another way of applying sociocultural theory to literacy studies is by looking at the ways students interact with popular culture in their learning. Dyson (1997), in a study of elementary students, traced the intersection of literacy learning and popular culture. She found, "In the official world of the third grade, children's use of media-based stories was linked to their identities, not only as boys and girls, but also as members of different sociocultural referent groups" (Dyson, 1997, p. 114). The third grade students "[used] stories to mark their affiliations with others, to disassociate themselves from others, and to negotiate with others across societal divisions" (pp. 115-116). Characters and narratives from popular cultural constantly made their way into the stories that these

children told. For the current study, it may be that the writers draw on popular culture in their spoken word poems as a kind of shorthand with the audience.

### *Funds of Knowledge*

Over the last twenty years, literacy research has begun to focus on “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992). To acknowledge students’ funds of knowledge is to recognize that students have rich, perhaps vast, expertise in spheres outside of school. For example, students may have expertise in mechanics, cooking, languages, or other practices required for life in their homes and communities. The concept of funds of knowledge is important because it counters earlier forms of deficit thinking, in which non-dominant students were seen to be out of synch with school practices because of differences in background viewed as deficiencies in knowledge (Valencia, 1997). Instead, a focus on funds of knowledge assumes that students acquire knowledge that is important in their communities. It also suggests that schools should attempt to bridge these home and community literacies with formal school literacies. As Delpit (2006) warns, “If we do not have some knowledge of children’s lives outside of the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students’ strengths leads to our ‘teaching down’ to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers of the school” (p. 173). The idea of funds of knowledge advances sociocultural theory by valuing home and community knowledge. The current study acknowledges that adolescent writers’ stories and experiences are vital in the construction of spoken word poetry. Their experiences in this spoken word poetry group may also help them accrue additional funds of knowledge they

can capitalize on in other situations.

### *Third Space*

Out-of-school knowledge and in-school learning can overlap, meeting in a *third space* (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004; Soja, 1996). Third space research asks scholars and teachers to think about the degree to which separate spheres of life overlap. Gutierrez writes, “People live their lives and learn across multiple settings, and this holds true not only across the span of their lives but also across and within the institutions and communities they inhabit” (2008, p. 150). Put another way, school walls should not divide spheres of learning (Alim, 2007).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in research that bridges the divide between in-school and out-of-school literacies (Alvermann & Hinchman, 2011; Gutierrez, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2001, 2002; Sweeny, 2010). Based on their research of out-of-school literacies, Hull and Schultz (2002) argue, “There is no better time for literacy theorists and researchers, now practiced in detailing the successful literate practices that occur out of school, to put their energies toward investigating potential relationships, collaborations, and helpful divisions of labor between schools and formal classrooms and the informal learning that flourishes in a range of settings” (p. 53). Hull and Schultz call for research on adolescents’ out-of-school literacies to make practical suggestions for improving instruction in schools, which is one of the goals of this current study. They also point out that if divisions of labor must exist between school and non-school contexts, more work is needed to show how these divisions should work.

These ideas about learning in different spaces are particularly relevant to this

study of a spoken word poetry group, which has events nearly every month in out-of-school spaces. What are the advantages associated with holding events at a public library on Saturdays, for example? Do poets feel freer to communicate their stories? In-school and out-of-school spaces can vary enormously in both their benefits and their costs.

### **Youth Literacies and Spoken Word Poetry**

This section shares some of the developments in youth literacies research that are relevant to this study of a spoken word poetry group.

#### *Writing Outside of Formal School Curriculum*

Writing that young people engage in outside of the formal curriculum goes by many names. This writing is referred to as out-of-school writing, extracurricular writing, unsanctioned writing, voluntary writing, and even self-sponsored writing. Gere (1994), who refers to this type of writing as *extracurricular writing*, discusses its long and rich history: “individuals . . . meet in living rooms, nursing homes, community centers, churches, shelters for the homeless, around kitchen tables, and in rented rooms to write down their worlds. These writers bear testimony to the fact that writing development occurs outside formal education” (p. 76). Extracurricular writing tends to involve some degree of autonomy and choice. Outside of formal instruction, authors choose their own writing genres, purposes, practices, and communities rather than have teachers decide these things for them.

Emig (1971), who has made important contributions to writing research by shifting attention to the writing process, found that out-of-school writing usually focuses

on the author's self or on society. Also, it tends to involve more pre-writing, and it is typically shared with peers. Additionally, out-of-school writing might involve a strong moment of completion, pauses and reflections, and revisions. Conversely, writing in school typically accompanies literary study or responds to current issues, and it is written for the teacher. Emig suggests that the processes involved in writing for school are different than those used outside of it.

In their review of out-of-school literacies research of the 1980s and 1990s, Hull and Schultz (2001) noted that researchers have investigated extracurricular writing for a range of different purposes, including the following:

1. To decouple the effects of literacy from the effects of schooling
2. To develop the notion of literacy as multiple
3. To account for school failure and out-of-school success
4. To identify additional support mechanisms for children, youth, and adults
5. To push our notions of learning and development. (pp. 602-603)

The current study is concerned to some degree with all five of these purposes.

### *Youth Literacies*

In their out-of-school writing, young people not only record the issues that affect them but they also use the language in which they think about these issues. Many scholars (Alim, 2007; Harris, 2006; Kinloch, 2005; Morrell, 2005; Paris, 2009) have stressed the importance of valuing the language of students. For example, Kinloch (2005) has argued that teachers need to respect the language of students' cultures, homes, and

interests. Alim (2007) has proposed that students be viewed “as the *sources*, *investigators*, and *archivers* of varied and rich bodies of knowledge rooted in their cultural-linguistic reality” (p. 17, emphasis in original). These viewpoints value students and their unique perspectives. Citing some of the advantages of a critical approach to English education, Morrell writes, “Critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation” (2005, p. 313). Respecting students’ out-of-school language practices is part of supporting students’ writing. Allowing students to tell their stories through spoken word poetry can help support this goal.

In their lives beyond school, adolescents are using a range of writing practices for multiple purposes and audiences. Some of these forms of writing include drama (Winn, 2011), autobiography (Wissman & Vasudevan, 2012), graffiti (Chang, 2005; Cintron, 1997), texting (Paris, 2010), fan fiction (Trainor, 2008), blogs (Blinka & Smahel, 2009), and writing with new technologies (Kafai & Peppler, 2011; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Adolescents are employing these forms of writing in different ways.

Mahiri (2008) has demonstrated how “street scripts,” which are works that youth produce in response to their lived experiences, can support the language of students. Mahiri has examined some of the ways that youth employ video essays, raps, screenplays, and poems, finding that sometimes these writers even use complex rhetorical techniques. Mahiri (2008) writes:

When we take the time to explicate their works and to hear their voices as



we would with other literacy and literature scripts, we find that their writings are not just mirrors, but lenses through which they view and reflect on their lives. They also reveal the personal views of these youth in critique of their social worlds. (p. 41)

Participants in Mahiri's study attempted to gain greater control of their lives by writing about them, "actively conceiving and critiquing the nature of their experiences by naming and explicating the paradoxes that clouded their lives" (p. 38). The process of writing "street scripts" can clearly be transformative for adolescents.

These texts share some overlap with Hip Hop culture. Bradley (2009) writes, "Hip hop emerged out of urban poverty to become one of the most vital cultural forces of the past century" (p. xiii.). He explains that it grew out of the South Bronx "in defiance of inferior educational opportunities and poor housing standards" (p. xiv).

Studying the use of Hip Hop culture in a high school classroom, Hill (2009) found that it helped students heal. Through lyrical analysis, students "bearing the scars of suffering shared their stories in ways that provided a form of release and relief for themselves and others" (p. 65). He describes this practice:

By wounded healing, I refer not only to the therapeutic dimensions of personal and collective storytelling, but also a critical engagement with majoritarian narratives that exposes and produces new possibilities.

Through this practice, students formed a storytelling community in which membership was predicated upon an individual's ability and willingness to "expose their wounds" (share their stories) to the remainder of the group. (Hill, 2009, pp. 65-66)

Hill explains that when one student, Robin, had the courage to share her story, it changed the environment of the classroom. This moment “facilitated the formation of a classroom community in which students shared their own stories and responded to others” (Hill, 2009, p. 69). In addition to “personal disclosure” (p. 69), students in the class also used “co-signing practices” (i.e., supportive verbal and non-verbal responses) (p. 71). Hill found that over time these practices helped build a sense of community among the students.

Kirkland (2008) also supports the use of Hip Hop in the English classroom. He asks, “Why aren’t we using hip-hop anyway to help students make sense of the world and make meaning of their lived situations?” (p. 74). Kirkland explains that students’ worlds offer windows into literacy: “New English Education gives ELA teachers a way to incorporate the artifacts of student life (e.g., rap, body art, graffiti, and so on) into classrooms to not only help advance students’ academic literacy development but to ultimately adjust how literacy is conceived of, practiced, and assessed” (2008, p. 73). Kirkland makes a strong case for teachers to pay more attention to students’ interests and experiences.

At this point, it is also worth acknowledging genre theory. As Devitt explains, “Genres usually develop through the actions of many people, in groups” (2004, p. 63). Additionally, their “functions are typically multiple and ideological as well as situational,” and “a genre reflects, constructs, and reinforces the values, epistemology and power relationships of the group from which it is developed and for which it functions” (2004, p. 64). In other words, genres interact with participants, purposes, values, and contexts. They do not operate in isolation.

Prior to the current study, I investigated youth songwriting in a study of two 18-year-old rappers. That research looked at songwriters' writing practices (W.R. Williams, 2013), similarities between participants' writing and common concepts in English language arts curriculum such as figurative language and the six traits of writing (Williams, 2015a), and the importance of tools, collaboration, and performance in becoming a songwriter (Williams, 2015b). Young people are pursuing various forms of writing on their own time, and producing meaningful—and sometimes very sophisticated and polished—work.

### *Spoken Word Poetry*

Spoken word poetry is a form of writing that appeals to many young people. As Gabriel, one of the group leaders of Young Voices Rise, explained throughout the year, spoken word is one of the elements of Hip Hop (like rap and graffiti art).

In a study of three African American spoken word poets, Sutton (2008) found that “spoken word poetry strives to provide the audience with a sense of hope. In addition to presenting an honest portrayal of some of the negative aspects of the community, much of the poetry also leaves audience members feeling that they have the power to transcend this negativity” (pp. 231-232). An essential purpose of spoken word is to draw attention to familiar problems, which makes it an appealing medium for young people. Spoken word also encourages powerful delivery of words. Elements like emotion, timing, and cadence are at work. Of particular interest to teachers and researchers in education, Sutton's participants did not enjoy writing in school. They found poetry “alienating and uninspiring because it had little to do with their daily lives” (2008, p. 223). In contrast,

spoken word poetry gave these writers a chance to perform poetry about real issues with a real audience.

Fisher (2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b) has studied both adult and youth spoken word poetry groups. In her examination of two open microphone venues in California, she refers to these groups as African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities (2003). She discusses their connection to culture and art:

Tecumseh and Mikell both used the term *something* to acknowledge that there was a life component for people of African descent that was not being cultivated and satisfied in the daily infrastructures of work and school. The Speak Easy was a way to search for that missing connection to ancestry, culture, and experience through poetry, music, art, and interaction with people who shared a similar worldview. (Fisher, 2003, p. 375, emphasis in original)

Her participants also compared their spoken word experience to the practice of testifying at church, saying poets had messages to share with those gathered. Also, Fisher discusses how members of these communities “blended oral and written traditions in their practice and sometimes in their delivery,” and there were musicians and published poets among them (2003, p. 384).

In her examination of two high school groups in New York City, Fisher (2005a) found that “these writing communities are more than spaces for literacy learning” (p. 127). They motivate students to go to high school, and they help students as they move on to higher education. The Power Writers group she studied used a feedback process for poems called “read and feed” (2005a, p. 128). Also, the leaders of these groups were

practicing poets themselves, allowing interactions between older and younger poets, or “the inclusion of intergenerational perspectives” in the community (2005a, p. 128).

Fisher (2007a) discusses mentor roles in greater detail in an article about the two groups she studied in California. She writes, “Elders or veteran poets were often referred to in these communities as soldiers—that is, mentors who shared a strong commitment to organizing opportunities for young people to engage in writing and performing in and beyond their local communities” (p. 140). Fisher explains that these mentors are “literacy activists and advocates,” “practitioners of the craft,” and “historians of the word” (2007a, pp. 157-158).

Fisher’s (2007b) book, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*, offers a bridge between spoken word poetry and secondary English language arts curriculum. In her study of spoken word poetry in an after-school group, Fisher found that students “began to view themselves as literate, capable human beings who rightfully belonged to a community of poets and writers” (2007b, p. 83). She describes that students valued “having ‘no boundaries,’ being ‘free,’ and not being ‘judged’ within the Power Writing seminar; however, they also talked about how the class focused on their needs and desires” (2007b, p. 93). One participant explained, “Poetry is about us. In English class the reading and curriculum is about them. The school’s work. I don’t like that at all” (2007b, p. 93). Fisher’s work encourages educators to reconsider the ways that writing is taught in school. Spoken word poetry, which is usually not present in school curriculum, offers adolescents powerful opportunities to pay attention to language and to speak out about relevant issues. Also, as Fisher (2005b) explains, “Spoken word has emerged as a chosen form of poetry for many adolescents because of its cadence, sense of

urgency, and relationship to music” (p. 94).

Jocson (2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2011) has researched a spoken word poetry program called “Poetry for the People,” which was created by June Jordan. Using sociocultural theory, Jocson found that student-teacher-poets engaged in “a Vygotskian-inspired apprenticeship” as they expanded students’ “zones of development,” and students were validated as “legitimate peripheral participants” in this process (2006a, p. 247). Jocson used a “poetry as practice, process, and product” framework to analyze the data for this study, and she believes this framework is also “a viable mechanism for innovating the teaching and learning of poetry as well as other genres of writing in literacy classrooms” (2006a, p. 253).

Antonio, a participant in Jocson’s study, became much more serious about competition as he progressed in his writing of spoken word poetry. He engaged in “social critique” in his poems (2006a, p. 251) and conducted research “to add currency to his work” (p. 253). Antonio also seemed “to gain social capital among peers” (2006a, p. 241) because of his involvement in poetry.

In another article, Jocson (2006b) describes a second participant in the study, Damon, who wrote about his racial identity in his poems. Writing spoken word poetry increased Damon’s confidence and helped him to become a better writer. Jocson writes:

Rewriting became a significant part of Damon’s writing process. He gained certain strategies such as the use of the thesaurus to pay closer attention to ‘certain words’ and revised his work at least four times. Later, I found that he maintained this attitude and carried it over to other forms of writing such as essays and book reports. Damon’s grade 12 Senior

Composition teacher . . . shared with me how his writing stood out against other students' in class. (2006b, p. 705)

Skills learned through spoken word poetry may very well transfer to other forms of writing.

Spoken word poetry has grown in popularity, and Jocson (2011) explains some of the reasons: It “exposes social realities that are often steeped in the margins,” “is accessible to experimentation in a way that prose is not,” “allows . . . individuals to mobilize different identities (sometimes collectively),” and “blends elements of literary precision and performance with the universal cache of hip hop music, language, and style” (p. 156). Also, with advances in technology, poets are now able to take a poem “from the page to the stage and onto the screen” (Jocson, 2011, p. 158). Jocson points out the potential of spoken word poetry for building critical literacy as well.

Yet another scholar, Johnson (2010), who studied slam communities in Los Angeles, argues that more work is needed to uncover the homophobia and sexism present in some slam communities. While the problems he observed may be limited to certain adult communities, his work reminds scholars of spoken word poetry groups to attend to “racial, gender, class, and sexual dynamics between and among various performers, whereby the notion of community is always a contested concept” (Johnson, 2010, p. 397). He writes, “With all the progressive politics many slam and spoken word poets live by, it is somewhat astonishing how frequently queer folks are pushed to the margins” (Johnson, 2010, p. 415).

Weinstein (2010), like Fisher (2007b), has looked at how spoken word poetry can help young people develop “literate identities” (Weinstein, 2010, p. 2). Weinstein writes,

“They begin to see themselves as writers and to act on that self-perception” (2010, p. 2). Specifically, “If this teen lives . . . where there is [youth spoken word] programming, he/she . . . attends a workshop or applies to be a member, and then the teen starts to see how seriously insiders take poetry, starts to hear and want to be able to claim the insider knowledge that grounds the community, and wants to become someone whose skills are respected by other insiders” (Weinstein, 2010, p. 14). Jocson (2008) also addresses the theme of identity in her book. She found that literacy practices of spoken word poetry groups influence young people’s identities. “The sharing of experiences through writing and reading further validates the students’ identities. It is a reminder of the importance of reinforcing students’ abilities and active roles in class” (Jocson, 2008, p. 169). On a related note, Dyson (2005) writes, “Students themselves listen to the human world around them and use those voices to construct their own voiced response” (p. 155). How a young person comes to write spoken word poetry—and begin to identify with the role of spoken word poet—is an area in need of further investigation. The current study addresses this need by asking participants about their writing histories and their identities as spoken word poets.

In addition to developing a literate identity, young people may overcome their shyness and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem through spoken word poetry (Weinstein, 2010). Writing spoken word poetry seems to be therapeutic as well. “There is no shortage of therapeutic narratives in [youth spoken word]” (Weinstein, 2010, p. 16). In *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*, Weiss and Herndon (2001) urge teachers to help adolescents use these difficult experiences:

Rather than treat teenagers’ problems as though they don’t exist, we want



to embrace the complicated web of obstacles and achievements teenagers encounter as fertile ground for setting the writing process in motion. If a young writer questions herself and feels supported along the way, then gets to the level of performing her poetry for her peers, she comes closer to understanding herself in the context of others. (p. xviii)

They add that “such moments of sharing are incredible, for they bring an isolated, perhaps solitary writer’s experience to an audience and suddenly turn that audience into a community of listeners who not only can relate to the poet’s marginalizing experiences, but who likely have shared those experiences as well” (p. 83). This recalls Hill’s (2009) notion of wounded healing. Kass (2007) shares an example of wounded healing he saw with his students. He writes, “I never imagined a girl would read a poem in class about how painful it was for her to choose to have an abortion and that, the next day, when she showed up for class she’d find a bouquet of flowers on her desk paid for by her classmates” (Eleveld, 2007, p. 198).

These youth poetry groups are not without their challenges, however. Weinstein and West (2012) write about some of the difficulties adolescent spoken word poets may face. In particular, they focus on how poets may be unfairly associated with the poems they write, that some poets in a group may be given a higher status than other poets, and the popularity of spoken word poetry in the media can be a negative force.

Jocson (2006b) writes that “poetry has the potential to create safe spaces where students’ convictions and experiences can lead them to charter new learning terrains” (p. 706). Reyes (2006) offers some suggestions for building a spoken word poetry community, including attending to the physical space, developing workshop activities,

and respecting writers' knowledge. Weiss and Herndon (2001) acknowledge the vulnerability students may feel in these spaces, especially when a classroom has been transformed into a spoken word space. They write, "Achieving comfort in a classroom is a difficult task that represents a radical departure from the regimented English classes we suffered through when in high school" (Weiss & Herndon, 2001, p. 6). They recommend moving desks into a semicircle. Also, Reyes suggests, "It matters how we speak to our students. It matters what we call them. So let's call them Poets. Let's call them Writers. Let's give them the titles that have traditionally seemed to be reserved for the professional adults" (2006, pp. 14-15).

### **Additional Considerations in Studying Youth Writers**

The final section of this literature review discusses additional considerations in this study of a spoken word poetry group, including ideas about learning, creativity, identity, and authenticity.

#### *Writing and Learning*

Studying spoken word poets can give scholars and teachers more information about how young people grow as writers in non-academic contexts. For example, these poets may engage in deliberate practice as they develop expertise (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Ericsson, 1996, 2005, 2008; Nandagopal & Ericsson, 2012). Additionally, these writers may use "self-regulation" (Zimmerman & Labuhn, 2012) and experience "flow" (Abbott, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996) as they write spoken word poetry. Members might also collaborate in various ways (John-Steiner, 2000; Lunsford & Ede,

2012).

### *Writing and Creativity*

Additionally, the act of writing spoken word poetry demands some creativity on the writer's part. Robinson (2009, 2011) has called for schools to cultivate student creativity to prepare them for the challenges of the future. Many scholars (Amabile, 1989; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995) have stressed the need to support students' creative pursuits. Still, others (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994; Gardner, 1982) have offered frameworks for studying creativity. Studying spoken word poets also involves studying their creative processes and products.

### *Writing and Identity*

Another aspect that often comes into play when studying writers is identity. Of course, there are different ways of thinking about identity. One may focus on cultural, ethnic, or racial identities (Castells, 1997; Ferdman, 1990; Tatum, 2012) or on how "individual histories, cultures, and languages provide us with a kind of gel that holds us together" (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 230). In literacy studies, identity research often looks at racial dimensions of identity. For example, in one study of a writing institute for Black adolescent girls, Muhammad (2012) observed the ways that model texts and writing helped participants make sense of their experiences. Focusing on their shared culture helped these writers. Haddix (2012) also examined a summer writing institute, looking at the ways that Hip Hop and spoken word helped Black males develop writer identities.

Other scholars have studied adolescence and the unique identity issues that arise during this time in one's life (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Eckert, 1989; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Sadowski, 2008). Eckert (1989) looked at social roles in high schools and found that schools replicate the larger social world. Gardner's (2008) work on multiple intelligences has recognized the ways that schools shape students' identities by valuing certain intelligences and disregarding others. Raible and Nieto (2008) remind us, "Identities also change in response to the sociopolitical contexts in which people live. Our identities have been shaped and continue to be influenced by the people with whom we interact and the material and social conditions of our lives" (p. 208). Additionally, identities are enacted over time both during routine events and special circumstances. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) have demonstrated how adolescents' identities are shaped through encounters with opportunities and obstacles.

Some scholars have looked at how identity works within groups. Burroughs and Smargorinsky (2009), extending Gee's (2012) notion of *identity kits*, write that just as "hip-hop artists use accents, dialects, costume, attitude, and stance to communicate 'rapper' [or] . . . 'Christian rapper' or 'gangsta rapper' . . . , discourse does not simply embody an individual's personal effort to take on a social identity. It simultaneously accounts for the ways in which groups of people attempt to socialize people into their perspectives and practices" (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009, pp. 171-172). Gee (2000-2001) provides four categories for thinking about different kinds of identities, including the following: (1) Nature-identity, (2) Institution-identity, (3) Discourse-identity, and (4) Affinity-identity (p. 100). These categories can overlap. Additionally, we do not identify with all of our identities equally (Gee, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the affinity-

identity is key because writers gather around a shared affinity or interest, spoken word poetry.

Moje reminds us that “identities are always situated in relationships, and that power plays a role in how identities get enacted and how people get positioned on the basis of those identities” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 231). They write, “All learning—and literacy learning, in particular—can be conceived of as moments in identity construction and representation” (p. 233). Additionally, identities change over time, which can make studying them both interesting and challenging. Wortham (2008) suggests, “A student can be identified within a speech event. Whenever a participant enters a speech event, his or her identity is potentially in play” (p. 294). Over time, and throughout the course of multiple events, an identity may stabilize; however, examining identity in a single event can lead to conclusions that do not hold across other events in the person’s life. Roth and colleagues (2004) have examined how teachers and students develop, and sometimes reshape, their identities over time. In addition to examining multiple events, studying multiple identity artifacts (Leander, 2002) can provide valuable information.

Hull and Katz (2006) write, “The desire to acquire new skills and knowledge is inextricably linked to who we want to be as people” (p. 43). Moje and Lewis (2007) have studied the transformative power of knowledge, writing, “Learning . . . has the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships” (p. 18). By sharing our writing in public forums, we can reinforce our identities. Hull and Katz point to “the power of public performance in generating especially intense moments of self-enactment” (2006, p. 47).

As Burgess and Ivanic (2010) note, “Identity is constructed and changed through acts of writing” (p. 228). They list five aspects of writing identity, which include the following: (1) Socially available possibilities for selfhood, (2) The autobiographical self of the writer, (3) The discorsal self, (4) The authorial self, and (5) The perceived writer (2010, p. 236). The first of these, “socially available possibilities for selfhood,” acknowledges the power of sociocultural context. The second, “the autobiographical self of the writer,” acknowledges the writer’s personality, preferences, and history. Burgess and Ivanic explain that the third aspect, “the discorsal self” is “the self that is inscribed in the text,” and the fourth aspect, “the authorial self” is “the presence the writer constructs for herself as author of the text” (2010, p. 240). Finally, the fifth aspect, “the perceived writer,” is how a writer imagines others will read him or her. These scholars add, “Writing demands in educational settings are also identity demands” (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010, p. 228). Ivanic (1994) argues that identity demands can cause struggling writers to get stuck. In other words, rather than the content acting as an obstacle, writers’ problems may derive from feeling “uncomfortable with the self which they are projecting as they write” (p. 6). For example, English language learners may struggle with their writing identities, having been told over the years that they are not good writers (Fernsten, 2008).

Herrington and Curtis (2000) found that writers have a “persistent personal impulse to construct coherent selves through writing” (p. 354). Collins and Blot (2003) argue a similar point: “Many compose themselves by composing” through “diaries, letters (now of course often electronic), jotted-down poems, [and] songs, especially in late adolescence” (p. 1). Writing helps with identity development, these scholars suggest.

Herrington and Curtis (2000) observed “how students come to use writing at once for self-reflection and self-fashioning—as a mediator between self and other selves” (p. 356).

While spoken word poets may write as an act of self-fashioning or self-reflection, the public nature of this discourse also demands that the poem be about more than the poet.

A good poem will resonate with people who have not had the same experience.

The various ideas about identity presented above will be useful in the current study. Individual as well as group identity play out in various ways as members of this spoken word poetry group interact with each other and enact identities through writing and performance.

### *Writing and Authenticity*

Another aspect of writing research that is relevant to a study of a spoken word poetry group is the notion of authenticity. Young people need opportunities to write for authentic purposes and audiences. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) explain, “Effective learning situations must approximate as closely as possible what real practitioners know and do in the world. This requires a culture of immediate use” (p. 156). In short, writing should have authentic uses. Educational theorists (Dewey, 1938, 2009; Tyler, 1969) have long stressed the need to connect curriculum to students’ experiences.

Additionally, “to talk about writing apart from the people who do it, apart from their being, is to put writing in a small box and remove the wonder and the magic and the power from it” (Nelson, 2004, p. xii). Writing happens in situated contexts. Writers write for real purposes. Britton and colleagues (1979) suggest, “Work in school ought to equip a writer to choose his own target audience and, eventually, to be able, when the occasion

arises, to write as someone with something to say to the world in general. And we believe many more children would develop the ability if they had more opportunities and a stronger incentive” (p. 192).

Vygotsky stressed the importance of authentic contexts for meaningful learning. In fact, his insights about writing instruction seem especially relevant today. He wrote:

Instead of being founded on the needs of children as they naturally develop and on their own activity, writing is given to them from without, from the teacher’s hands. This situation recalls the development of a technical skill such as piano-playing: the pupil develops finger dexterity and learns to strike the keys while reading music, but he is in no way involved in the essence of the music itself. (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 105-106)

Vygotsky further advocated, “Writing should be meaningful for children . . . and . . . should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life” (1978, p. 118). He understood that authentic contexts and tasks support deep learning, a concept that is central to the spoken word poetry group that is the focus of the current study.

As the above sections demonstrate, this study of a spoken word poetry group in the urban Southwest is grounded in larger conversations about sociocultural theory, literacy and writing research using a sociocultural lens, youth literacies and spoken word poetry research, and additional considerations in studying youth writers.

I expect this study to contribute to previous work in several ways. It will provide insight into the practices of a diverse, majority Hispanic spoken word poetry group in the urban Southwest, a setting that is sometimes tense for those from non-dominant groups. Also, it will examine the writing lives of adolescent members and consider whether they



believe they have changed as a result of their participation in the group. Additionally, the spoken word poetry group in this study has not existed for very long in its current form (i.e., Gabriel counts the year of this study as his second full season in this group).

Because YVR is relatively young in its current iteration, this study may yield quite different findings than more established groups studied in the past. Finally, past studies of youth spoken word poets (Fisher, 2007b; Jocson, 2008) have tended to focus on groups situated within high schools, yet more research is needed to learn about the many out-of-school organizations that support youth literacies.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This study of spoken word poets in the urban Southwest employs qualitative case study methodology (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011; Yin, 2006). Merriam (2009) describes case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Young Voices Rise is a bounded system that is divided into distinct units of Brave New Voices competition cycles, beginning each fall. Also, members are gathered around a specific interest, spoken word poetry; this shared interest helps to define the limits of what the group is and what it is not.

Yin (2006) argues that case studies are best used for “either a descriptive question (*what* happened?) or an explanatory question (*how* or *why* did something happen?),” and case studies are useful when a researcher needs “to illuminate a particular situation, to get a close (i.e., in-depth and firsthand) understanding of it” (p. 112, emphasis in original). Case study methodology is appropriate for a study that seeks to understand the workings of a spoken word poetry group as well as the writing lives of its adolescent members.

Of course, there are different kinds of case studies. As Yin explains: “the term ‘case study’ can refer to either *single-case* or *multiple-case studies*. . . . You also can choose to keep your case *holistic* or to have *embedded* subcases within an overall holistic case” (2006, p. 113, emphasis in original). The current study examines participants’ writing lives as multiple cases embedded within Young Voices Rise, a single case. The pages that follow discuss the study’s design in more detail.

## Research Questions

Three main research questions drive this study. They include the following:

1. What are the characteristics and practices of Young Voices Rise (YVR), a group of spoken word poets in the urban Southwest?
2. How do adolescent members of this group view their writing and themselves as writers?
3. What changes—personal or writing-related—do adolescent writers attribute to their experiences in YVR? What changes have others (e.g., fellow adolescent members, teaching artists, the researcher) noticed in these writers?

One component of this study involves looking at Young Voices Rise as a group, examining organizational logistics such as when, where, and how often the group meets, who attends group functions, and what practices members engage in together. It also attempts to determine the distinguishing features of YVR, or what makes it different from other spoken word poetry groups. Literacy learning occurs in socially situated contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). YVR operates within a specific historical moment, political atmosphere, and geographical area, and the group shares history, tools, practices, and values that establish it as a particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Some of YVR's characteristics and practices may be unique to the group, while others may be common to youth spoken word poetry organizations across the country.

Another component of this study looks at the adolescent writers who belong to YVR, examining their writing practices and attitudes. This second research area is concerned with adolescent writers' views of their own writing and themselves as writers. To address the second research question, this study explores adolescent members' writing

histories, sense of writing identity, and explications of their own poems. Additionally, areas such as writing motivation, role models, sponsors, powerful experiences, challenges, and anticipated writing future are explored. Examining these multiple aspects of writing will paint a fuller picture of writers' attitudes about themselves and their work.

A third component of this study deals with participants' perceptions of how this spoken word poetry group has changed them. It also asks others (e.g., other adolescent members of YVR, Gabriel and Mark, even the researcher) to comment on changes observed in these writers during their time in YVR. This question does pose some challenges. For example, during a yearlong study, it is possible for participants to seem unchanged, so the researcher's perspective will be limited. Also, peers and group leaders may notice changes in the participant, but these changes might not necessarily result from participation in YVR; instead, the changes may result from any number of other experiences in the participant's life outside of YVR or even be the result of aging and maturity. Therefore, in answering this question, the participants' perspectives of their own growth through YVR will be given the most weight. Ultimately this question deals with perceptions rather than a measurement of growth in a quantitative sense.

Together, the three research questions seek to uncover how writing works in this spoken word poetry group. The purpose of shifting back and forth between group and individual perspectives is to capture different elements of the same phenomenon and develop a more nuanced understanding of YVR and its writers. Shifting between these perspectives is somewhat similar to switching between wide angle and telephoto lenses when photographing at the same location. Both types of perspectives are valuable and show different aspects of what appear to be the same scene.

## **Researcher's Stance**

Before the current project, I designed and carried out two other case studies. The first of these examined secondary English teachers' novel planning practices. The second looked at youth songwriters' writing practices (W.R. Williams, 2013). This second study came out of an Investigating Youth Literacies course with Django Paris at Arizona State University. His course helped me to see that the student literacies I had observed as a classroom teacher were a very small part of what was actually going on in students' lives. As I studied youth songwriting, I saw firsthand just how complex and sophisticated extracurricular writing could be. That work, like other studies in the field of out-of-school literacies, found value in venturing outside of school to understand the literacies that young people practice and identify with.

This prior research helped me to reflect on how formal English language arts (ELA) curriculum is sometimes out of touch with the writing that drives many students, including those from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds attending urban schools in the Southwest. Rather than embracing youth literacies, schools are sometimes unaware of them, unfortunately. One goal of the current study is to bring youth literacies in the Southwest to light, offering a counter-narrative to stories of high Hispanic dropout rates (Homeroom, n.d.) and a lack of literacy among youth (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2004). Another purpose is to involve students' points-of-view in education research (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009) and reform as we re-envision new possibilities for English education together.

I come to this study as a former high school teacher in the Southwest, having

taught at urban and suburban schools for nine years. As a researcher, I am committed to exploring literacy, creativity, and social justice. Although I am not a spoken word poet myself, I believe that we must meet kids where they are. If adolescents are interested in spoken word poetry, researchers should study this writing phenomenon because it matters to young people. While it can be humbling to venture into the unfamiliar, it is exciting also as we trust young people to teach us about literacy. Weiss and Herndon (2001) write, “When you encounter unfamiliar terrain, you must listen instead of seeking refuge in what you already know” (p. 60).

When Gabriel asked me to introduce myself to YVR members at a writing workshop, which did not happen at the first few events I attended, I explained that I was a researcher from Arizona State University and a former high school English teacher. I told them that I was there to learn about their spoken word poetry group and to try to discover new ways to make high school English classes more relevant to students.

As an adult who was not a teaching artist in the space, I was automatically positioned as an outsider. However, this position can sometimes offer the researcher “the advantage of noticing what insiders do not notice” (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 286). To the teenagers, I was clearly a researcher in the room, not a fellow poet. To be fair, few adults attended these workshops for adolescents, and when adult guests visited, there was not really an expectation for them to write or perform, unless they were teaching artists from the school clubs. Visiting classroom teachers, professors, parents, and other adult guests were welcome, but their age marked them as distinctly outside the scope of this youth spoken word poetry group.

At YVR workshops and slams throughout the year, I typically sat at the back of

the room with a video-camera tripod, audio-recorder, and notepad. One of the few times I intervened in group activities was when I noticed that some kids were arriving without paper and pens, and I started bringing these supplies to workshops. My participation in group activities grew slightly over the course of the 2013-2014 YVR season. I did interact with participants at breaks, commiserating with them when they drew a poor slot (e.g., going first in a slam usually guarantees low scores), offering words of encouragement or praise for a great performance, or asking them how things were going. Even when I attended slams, I was slow to participate as the audience members around me did. Snapping and shouting out encouragement during a poem are common practices at slams. However, my own cultural experiences had trained me to believe that interrupting a speaker was rude. Even though I knew the audience was expected to respond to poets, I was always nervous that if I made noise during a poem, I might distract the poet and make him or her forget lines. It took me until late in the season to feel comfortable with the norms of the group. By then, I could snap in response to a poem without worry.

While I was in this space with these writers, I did feel like I wanted to someday give them a spoken word poem in return for the stories they had shared with me. It seemed only fair that I share something meaningful, embracing the vulnerability that comes with such honesty. This development was not a part of my original study design, but it emerged from spending time with the group.

In his study of a Hip Hop class in a high school, Hill (2009) is critical of a classroom teacher who watched the group and listened to the students' stories but did not open up himself. Hill explains that the teacher:

was often positioned within the class as a voyeur who engaged in one-sided storytelling for the purpose of what Foucault (1990) calls “the pleasure of analysis,” or a self-centered obsession with the sources of pleasure (or in this case pain) of another person. It was this type of surveillance, or at least its perception, that further marginalized Mr. Colombo within the class (2009, p. 89).

Although I wanted to share my stories, I was also keenly aware that I seriously lacked expertise in writing spoken word poetry. Could I craft and perform a poem in this style? It seemed a talent I simply did not possess. However, with more exposure to YVR practices and hearing from Gabriel that my presence mattered to the group, my confidence grew. A new sense of belonging gave me the courage and inspiration to actually sit down and write a poem for the poets. I was able to “risk the self” (Hill, 2009, p. 97) and finally give the group a poem. (For more details about my unexpected poetic journey, which ran parallel to this study, please see the Afterward.)

## **Site**

This study took place in a large downtown area of the Southwest. The workshops and slams that ran from September 2013 to September 2014 almost always were held in a major public library. The library, which has its own teen wing and college preparation center, did not charge fees for this group to use meeting room space. However, attendance at these events grew throughout the year, and when the group surpassed fire code numbers for the April slam, the May slam had to be moved to a city center for the arts located next door to the library. Over the course of my time with YVR, adolescent



poets and adult supporters came from all over the metropolitan area to attend these events.

The library is made up of several floors. It is the central library in a much larger system of libraries around this town. Out in front of this building, a man regularly gathers signatures for petitions. Sometimes people outside of the library ask for change or sit with their belongings in the adjacent park.

YVR workshops took place in one of two rooms in the library. Usually they were held in the teen wing, a space that also houses books for adolescents, computers, study group tables, and televisions. At the back of this wing is an area with many small café rounds and chairs. YVR usually met back in this space and it felt somewhat private. To accommodate the 20 to 30 workshop participants, the group would pull the café rounds together into a larger circle. A few times, a large room was available on the same floor, so we had workshops and slams there. However, other groups were sometimes in that larger space. In fact, the last time we were in the large room, we had to move to make room for a technology class.

Slams usually took place in what was known as the lecture room on the same level. This wood paneled room seats about 80 people. Gabriel and friends carried in their equipment from the parking lot. At minimum they needed a microphone, a stand, and a speaker for the slams. The microphone and stand were set up in the front of the room right in the center. A table at stage right was set up with a speaker, and the deejay would operate from there. Deejays brought their own music on laptops or iPods. Usually the group displayed a professional-looking YVR banner with the group's logo at stage left. Judges for the poetry slam would sit in the front row, facing the deejay table. Hosts

would go back and forth between the microphone and a seat in the audience, often sitting in the very back of the room and blending in with other audience members. On those occasions when shirts, sweatshirts, or Mark's album were for sale, these would be sold from a table in the back. Gabriel's mother or one of the teaching artists would handle the money and merchandise.

I conducted most of the interviews in one of four study rooms within the library. Each of these rooms has three glass walls, one solid wall, a table, and four chairs. These rooms could be reserved in blocks of two hours per day, and four people were allowed in them at a time, which worked well for the small focus group interview that I conducted with three of the participants. While most of the adolescent interviews took place in these study rooms, there were some exceptions. I interviewed Shawna at the arts organization where she works because transportation was an issue for her. (In fact, a mentor from there waited for her in the adjoining office, ready to drive her home when our interview concluded.) I also once met Jorge in a quiet part of a mall food court close to his house because he was having a hard time getting to the library that day. I interviewed Gabriel in an office at the university where he works and goes to school because that was most convenient for him, and I interviewed Mark at a coffee shop within biking distance of his home.

## **Access**

I first became acquainted with Young Voices Rise when Mark, Gabriel, and Jorge performed at an English teachers' convention I attended in 2012. Their pieces were emotional and powerful. While their poetry and performances were impressive, what left

its mark on me that night was Gabriel's story about having dropped out of high school. I found, as a high school English teacher and doctoral student at that time, there was something more to be discovered, a story that needed to be told. I wanted to know more about Gabriel's school experiences and how he went on to become a spoken word poet and YVR co-founder. However, I filed these questions away in my mind, never expecting that I would end up working with this group one year later.

Jim Blasingame, my dissertation chair at Arizona State University, had noticed my interest in learning about youth literacies, and he brought up the possibility of studying Young Voices Rise. We discussed various youth writing groups in the Southwest, including an all-female writing group. However, we ultimately agreed on YVR because of their commitment to youth literacy, their reputation for making a difference in the lives of kids, and the diversity of the group. As a researcher, the trajectory of moving from studying songwriting to spoken word made sense, as there is much overlap between rap and spoken word. In fact, James, one of the participants in my songwriter study, was also a spoken word performer. In that study he shared with me a paper written for his first-year composition course, which described the benefits of spoken word poetry.

When I first attended a Young Voices Rise event at the library in the beginning of the 2013-2014 season, Gabriel met me at the door. Rather than questioning who I was and what I was doing there, he immediately welcomed me into the group, expressing appreciation that I was interested in studying YVR. He said that he saw my presence as a benefit to the group. After that meeting, Gabriel routinely greeted me with a hug, his standard greeting for several other adults as well. Mark did the same at his interview,

even though I saw him less frequently throughout the season. To say that this group welcomed me with open arms holds true, then, on both figurative and literal levels.

The adolescent participants who were recruited into the study were very friendly and eager to talk to me about their writing. The fact that Gabriel and Mark were on board with the study seemed enough for them to trust me, and they said as much. From the beginning of the study, several of these adolescent poets would go out of their way to approach me, saying, “Hi, Wendy. How are you?” When I interviewed Gabriel in June, he explained that these poets had really grown to trust me, and they appreciated that I was consistently present at YVR events throughout the year. It meant a lot to me that when Stacey, the youngest poet in the study, attended her first workshop (before that she only went to slams), she sat in the back of the room right next to me, confiding how scared she was to be there with all of these people she did not know. I am grateful that these young people trusted me and granted me access to their writing lives. They were open with me from the very beginning. Part of this is likely due to the community norms already established within YVR. The group encourages poets to get up and meet new people after every slam.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study included two adult group leaders and six adolescent members. Group leaders were recruited using the following criteria:

### Group Leader Criteria for Recruitment

- a. Involved in the founding or running of the organization.
- b. Interacts with adolescent members of the group.

Mark and Gabriel were both recruited for the study because they co-founded YVR, and they interact with adolescents at Saturday events at the library and in after-school clubs at various high schools in the area. Gabriel's day-to-day running of the group includes handling paperwork, posting information on Facebook, and sometimes hosting workshops and slams by himself. He credits Mark as being the face of the organization and its great artist and visionary. Despite these different roles, they seem to genuinely value each other's contributions to YVR.

Once Mark and Gabriel were recruited for the study, I sought out Gabriel's help in recruiting the adolescents. Gabriel was selected to assist in this task because he was more accessible at events. The adolescent participant criteria for this study consisted of the following:

Adolescent Participant Criteria for Recruitment

- a. Within the age range of 13-19.
- b. Cross-section of the group, representing the range of ethnicities, genders, and ages present.
- c. Diversity in experience: at least one beginning, one intermediate, and one advanced poet.

"Diversity in Experience" Considerations:

- The length of time the person has belonged to this spoken word poetry group.
- A group leader's recommendations concerning the person's skill level with spoken word poetry.

Gabriel ultimately recommended seven adolescents for the study. I invited all seven of

them, and six—Shawna, Jorge, Rafael, Jasmine, Nicole, and Stacey—ended up joining the study. We wanted the participants to reflect the larger population of YVR, or what Yin (2006) calls the “typical case” (p. 115).

As the chart below suggests, YVR is a diverse group. The majority of YVR adolescent members are Hispanic, but Black and White members routinely attend events, and sometimes Native American writers are present. Occasionally a Muslim teenager would come to an event wearing a headscarf. Both male and female teenagers participate in events, and there are typically more girls than boys. One workshop I attended—the workshop described on the first pages of Chapter 1—had all female participants, but that was the only time I observed that happen. The group is diverse in other ways, too. A few members are openly lesbian, gay, and transgender. Some writers come to YVR through outreach workshops that Gabriel and Mark conduct in conjunction with an organization for abused and homeless children. Some members have YVR-affiliated poetry clubs at their schools; others come because this is their only opportunity to practice spoken word.

See the chart below for details about each adolescent participant:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Time in YVR</b>	<b>Previous Experience or Affiliation with YVR</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade in School</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>
<b>Shawna</b>	Beginning	3 months	Met Mark through an arts organization.	19	pursuing GED	Female	Black
<b>Jorge</b>	Advanced	2 years, 1 month	Participated in 2 Brave New Voices competitions. Attended high school poetry club.	18	college freshman	Male	Hispanic

<b>Rafael</b>	Beginning	1 year	Attends high school poetry club.	18	12	Male	Latino
<b>Jasmine</b>	Intermediate	1 year, 1 month	Participated in 1 Brave New Voices competition. Attends high school poetry club.	16	11	Female	Hispanic
<b>Nicole</b>	Intermediate	1 year, 8 months	Participated in 1 Brave New Voices competition. Attends high school poetry club.	16	11	Female	White
<b>Stacey</b>	Beginning	2 years	Met Mark when he presented at her middle school.	15	9	Female	Hispanic

The information in this chart was self-reported by participants at the beginning of the study (with the exception of “level,” which was determined in consultation with Gabriel). Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection**

This study draws on multiple forms of data, including observations of group events, interviews with adult group leaders and adolescent participants, and collection of artifacts. These various sources generated a large amount of data in just one year. Specifically, my notes and transcripts from observations and interviews generated more than 425 single-spaced pages of data. All of the data sources for this study are described below.

### *Observations*

To understand YVR as a larger case of its own, I attended group events for one year (from September 2013 to September 2014). In September 2013, I attended two separate YVR events. One was a public, university-sponsored workshop and slam, and the other event was a performance by Mark at a convention for English teachers. I did not collect data at these preliminary visits.

The YVR events for 2013-2014 are listed in the chart below:

Date	Event	Workshop Leader	Guest	Slam Leader	Other Notes
9-21-13	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	A humanities professor from a local university	Mark	This was a university-sponsored event with pizza and giveaways. The theme was "humor."
9-27-13	Conference Performance	----	---	---	Mark was the sole performer at an evening event for an English teachers' conference.
10-12-13	Workshop & Slam	Mark	---	Gabriel	---
10-26-13	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	An arts professor from a local university	Gabriel	The workshop mostly consisted of a PowerPoint presentation by the arts professor to recruit YVR members to his university.
11-8-13	Town Slam Event	---	---	Mark & Gabriel	This citywide slam took place at a center for the arts across town from the library.
11-23-13	Workshop & Slam	Mark	---	Mark	---
1-18-14	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	A spoken word poet / coach from California	Gabriel	---



<b>2-15-14</b>	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	An education professor & a YVR teaching artist	Gabriel	This was a university-sponsored event with giveaways and snacks. The theme was “values.”
<b>3-15-14</b>	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	---	Gabriel	---
<b>4-19-14</b>	Preliminary Slam Off & Movie	---	---	Gabriel	In this preliminary slam, performers were cut from 20 to 10. Afterwards, a university-sponsored event took place at a cultural center next door to the library. Pizza and giveaways were provided, a movie about spoken word poets was shown, and a YVR teaching artist led a post-movie discussion
<b>5-10-14</b>	Final Slam Off	---	---	Gabriel	This final slam took place outside at a center for the arts next door to the library. Performers were cut from 10 to 8 to 6 to 4 to determine the 4 poets going on to the Brave New Voices Competition in Philadelphia.
<b>7-19-14</b>	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	---	Gabriel	This workshop was held in an art museum on the other side of town from the library. The workshop included a tour of a special photography exhibit, sharing of poems about the photos, and a slam without judging.
<b>9-20-14</b>	Workshop & Slam	Gabriel	A local poet	Gabriel	This was my final visit for the study and the day I performed my spoken word poem.

Once IRB paperwork was approved in early October 2013, I began recruiting participants and collecting data at events. One key source of data collection involved video-recording YVR events. Erickson (2006) makes the following recommendation for video-recording:

For research purposes it is best to use raw video footage prepared with a minimum of camera editing, that is, shot continuously (preferably with an attachable wide-angle lens) with little movement of the camera from side

to side (panning). . . . The main advantage of this kind of footage is that it provides a continuous and relatively comprehensive record of social interaction, a document that is to some extent phenomenologically neutral. (p. 177)

For workshops, I aimed a Canon video-camera toward the workshop leader and the surrounding students on either side. Because students were sitting in a circle and I usually sat directly across from the leader, the videotape captured the group leader and some workshop participants head-on. Often participants in the study sat in close proximity to the group leader. At slams, I pointed the camera toward the microphone.

In July 2014, after I had collected most of the data for the study, I went back and viewed all of the videos, and I wrote video notes based on these viewings. Viewing the videos near the end of the study helped me see earlier events with more experienced eyes. As I made these notes, I focused my attention and note-taking on the eight members of YVR who were actually enrolled in this study.

In addition to video-recording events, I used an audio-recorder to record communication at group events. The Olympus audio-recorder was subtle compared to the bulky video-camera on a tripod that required tape changes every hour and occasional battery changes when an outlet was unavailable. In contrast, the audio-recorder did not require constant interruptions, so it recorded the moments that the video-camera missed. Also, the audio-recorder is small and inconspicuous, so I could use it in venues where video-recording felt inappropriate (i.e., when the surrounding audience was not familiar with what I was doing). For example, the Town Slam brought together school club members and their parents from all over town. Because most of the performers at this

public event were not participants in the study, and most of them did not know what I was doing there, I used video-recording selectively and instead kept the audio-recorder running continuously.

I transferred audio-recordings to Express Scribe, a transcription program, and used a foot pedal to do all of my transcription. When I transcribed observations, I only typed the words of participants in the study. For example, a poet not enrolled in the study would read a poem, and then Gabriel would respond. I would transcribe these interactions between writers and Gabriel as follows:

[Poem 1 read.] Nice. Anybody else? Come on. It's fun.

[Poem 2 read.] Nice. Very good. I like that. Yes.

[Poem 3 read.] That's nice. All right. You went somewhere with that. I could dig it. (observation, March 15, 2014)

Because of the number and speed of interactions between members of YVR, it would not have been possible to stop and start the recorders with each interaction. Therefore, non-participants were omitted at the point of transcription and earlier when possible.

At each YVR event, I wrote ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) to capture my impressions of what was going on in the space and to record observations that my video-camera and audio-recorder would not capture (e.g., the number of attendees, conversations with participants at breaks). Additionally, I occasionally photographed study participants while they were engaged in YVR events, writing, discussing poems, preparing to present, or spitting their poems at the microphone.

## *Interviews*

Interviews were another important data source for this study. All interviews in this study were semi-structured (Merriam, 2009). As Brenner (2006) explains: “A semistructured protocol has the advantage of asking all informants the same core questions with the freedom to ask follow-up questions that build on the responses received” (p. 362).

I conducted interviews with Gabriel and Mark separately in June 2014, after observing the bulk of the events in YVR’s 2013-2014 season. These interviews were approximately 90 minutes each, and they addressed the group leaders’ backgrounds, perspectives about the group’s characteristics and practices, and opinions about the effects of YVR on the adolescent participants in the study. The 12-item protocol included questions such as the following:

- How did this spoken word poetry group come about?
- How is the group organized?
- Does the group help adolescent members with anything other than writing?
- Think of a powerful experience you have had yourself, or witnessed, during your time in this group. What happened?

Group leader interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in full. (For the entire group leader interview protocol, please see Appendix A.)

Interviews with group leaders, as well as those conducted with adolescent participants, encouraged interviewees to tell a story. Seidman (2006) recommends this technique because the story may reveal “a beginning, middle, and end to a segment of . . . experience, . . . characters, . . . conflict, . . . how [the participant] dealt with it, [and]

convey experience in an illuminating and memorable way” (pp. 87-88). Seidman (2006) argues that this technique “can lead to treasured moments in interviewing” (p. 88).

Adolescents were asked to participate in three interviews each over the course of the study. These interviews, like the group leader interviews, were also semi-structured in nature, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Most of the adolescents completed the first interview, “A Writing Life: Past/Present/Future,” in the winter. These interviews averaged about 50 minutes per participant, and they addressed the writers’ backgrounds, writing histories, motivation, role models, sponsors, practices, preferences, and school experiences. The 12-item protocol included questions such as the following:

- I want you to reflect on how you became the writer you are today. Tell me about your writing history.
- Think back to a time when you were faced with a writing challenge. What happened and how did you work through it?
- How important do you think writing will be in your future? Explain.
- What has been the most powerful experience you have had in your spoken word poetry group? Tell me the story.

(See Appendix A for the full protocol for the first adolescent interview.)

The second adolescent interview, “Belonging to a Spoken Word Poetry Group,” was originally intended to be one focus group interview with all six adolescent participants together in the spring. Merriam (2009) explains, “Since the data obtained from a focus group is socially constructed within the interaction of the group, a constructivist perspective underlies this data collection procedure” (pp. 94-94). To delve into the topic of what YVR is and how it helps young people, this method appeared to

suit the purpose of the interview well. Everyone could bounce ideas off each other. As it turned out, the older participants in the study were busy with their commitments to work or school or both, and the youngest participant in the study, Stacey, preferred to be interviewed alone. Therefore, I conducted one focus group interview with Jasmine, Nicole, and Rafael participating together. While this grouping was based on their availability and willingness to do a group interview, it worked nicely because these three writers are from the same high school and know each other well. They participate in the poetry club at their school, and they are good friends. Because of this prior familiarity, they had much to say about each other's development. With the remaining participants, I ended up interviewing Stacey by herself on that same day, which she was grateful for. Then in the summer when things had settled down a bit for the older members of the study, I met with Jorge to do his second interview. Shawna never responded to my invitation for a second interview. The focus group interview and the two individual interviews averaged approximately 90 minutes each. Participants talked about the group's organization and characteristics, how learning in the group is similar to and different from learning in school, and changes they have observed in each other during their time in the group. The 12-item protocol included questions such as the following:

- How did you find out about [YVR]?
- Which features of [this spoken word poetry group] are the most important for helping teenagers improve at spoken word poetry?
- How has it changed your writing?
- What changes have you noticed in each other? Let's discuss one of you at a time.

At this interview, I was also able to ask these writers about some of my preliminary findings since I had already begun data analysis. (See Appendix A for the full protocol for the second adolescent interview.)

The third adolescent interview, “The Stories Behind the Writing,” took place in the summer. These interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Additionally, select parts of these interviews were video-recorded. This interview was different from the others because it asked participants to bring hard copies or digital copies of two of their poems. While participants performed these pieces, I video-recorded them using iMovie on my laptop, played back the performances, and asked them to stop the video periodically and comment on a section; participants had the freedom to decide where to stop the video and what to discuss. In addition to requesting these commentaries from the poets, I asked specific questions about each poem, prompting them to tell me about the poem’s purpose, audience, process, tools, and any help received from the group. These interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes each. The 11-item protocol included questions such as the following:

- How does this poem fit with other writing you have done? Is it typical/atypical of your other work?
- How did you write this poem?
- Where does this poem show hints of the writer behind it?
- Let’s view your performance of this piece. As we do so, I want you to stop the video periodically and explain what is going on. Have you watched movie commentaries where directors, actors, or writers comment on their film while it’s playing? They give some background explaining what went into the

making of the film—the stories behind the work that viewers might not know otherwise. Our process today will work sort of like that, but you can pause the video and talk for a while.

Shawna did not participate in the third interview. (See Appendix A for the full protocol for this third adolescent interview.)

### *Artifacts*

This study also involved the collection of artifacts. When I first recruited the adolescent participants, I asked them to complete the top portion of a participant information form. This form asked them to come up with a preferred pseudonym, list their grade, gender, race/ethnicity, age, length of time in the group, parent occupation, home language, and grade in their last English class. It also asked participants to record any experiences with spoken word poetry before joining the group and to provide some background information about themselves. At the third interview, participants completed the bottom portion of the form, which asked them to write about any changes they had experienced in the spoken word poetry group since we had last met for an interview. (For the full participant information form, please see Appendix A.)

On the day of the adolescent participants' third interview, I collected two of their poems. They elected to send these poems via email. Rafael's situation was different. He had just lost many of his poems in the process of switching over to a new phone, so I transcribed his poems based on the audio-recording of that interview.

Participants performed and discussed their two poems during the third interview. As they needed to, poets consulted their phones, tablets, or laptop screens as they



performed and discussed their poems. Jorge, the only poet who had his poems memorized, stood up and used a range of gestures during his performances. As I transcribed the third interviews, I integrated the digital copies of the poems they had given me into the transcripts. Doing so allowed me to keep their layout decisions—and even errors—intact. When transcribing, I represented their discussion using parentheses and italics anywhere they stopped the performance video and commented.

In two separate sessions, once in the fall and once in the spring, I visited YVR's Facebook page and gathered posts by the group leaders. These posts often served to communicate information to the group such as when events were taking place. Sometimes they provided feedback about a past event. Social media correspondence was a valuable data source because it represented official communication from Gabriel to the group, a place where the group's goals, values, and attitudes were reified (Wenger, 1998) in an online space.

When YVR distributed handouts of any kind, I collected these as well. These artifacts tended to be notices of upcoming events elsewhere (e.g., adult poetry slams around town), but occasionally Mark distributed a poem at a writing workshop.

### *Triangulation*

This study was designed to triangulate data (Calfee & Sperling, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) by eliciting multiple data sources. Stake (2008) describes triangulation as “a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 133). One example of triangulation in this study involved seeking multiple perspectives on the changes in adolescent participants. That is,

in adolescent interviews, participants commented on how belonging to the group has changed them and the other adolescent participants in the study. Additionally, Gabriel and Mark shared their observations about how the adolescent participants changed through their membership in YVR. As a researcher attending 2013-2014 functions, I also observed some changes in the participants. Seeking out multiple perspectives can make case study findings more robust (Yin, 2006). These voices can confirm or disconfirm evidence.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Grounded Theory and Constant Comparative Methods*

I used grounded theory (Charmaz, 1983; Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to make sense of data collected in this study. A grounded theory approach allows the researcher to discover and build theory out of the data, rather than go into the study ready to impose a predetermined theory. Grounded theory allows for an inductive and recursive approach (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Merriam (2009) describes how the process of developing a grounded theory works:

Corbin and Strauss (2007) suggest three phases of coding—open, axial, and selective. *Open coding* is what one does at the beginning of data analysis . . . , tagging any unit of data that might be relevant to the study. *Axial coding* is the process of relating categories and properties to each other, refining the category scheme. In *selective coding*, a core category, propositions, or hypotheses are developed. (p. 200, emphasis in original)

As recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2007), I used open coding with the data. I read through observation notes and transcripts several times and then wrote descriptive tags in the margins next to the text. The process of open coding involved reducing chunks of content to the fewest words possible. For example, “Approximately 50 people in the audience” was labeled “People,” and “Read 10 poems for every one you write” was labeled “Advice.” Whenever possible, I used an *in vivo* code. Saldana (2009) defines an *in vivo* code as a code “taken directly from what the participant says” (p. 3). “Safe space” is an example of an *in vivo* code in this study.

The next phase of data analysis involved axial coding, or what is also known as “analytical coding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). This work involved examining the relationships between codes and resulted in the following four categories: context, goals, tools, and practices. These categories not only described the data within them, but they also signaled relationships between categories that were congruent with a sociocultural lens. In “The Method Section as Conceptual Epicenter in Constructing Social Science Research Reports,” Smagorinsky (2008) suggests using codes that fit the study’s theoretical frame; in particular, he discusses several of the categories that also emerged during the early stages of data analysis in this study. Smagorinsky writes:

I look at the tools that mediate thinking, the setting in which those tools have gained currency and sanction, and the goals toward which people put them to use. These general categories . . . provide a framework through which to develop more finely tuned codes that specifically account for the thinking that takes place by the people who participate in my research (2008, p. 399).

As the current study continued, I reworked codes and categories to reflect the nuances in the group that were coming to light. In this way, axial coding was by no means fixed; instead, it was subject to revision as I continued to learn more about the group and participants and saw new relationships among them.

An important aspect of grounded theory is the use of constant comparative methods, which Merriam (2009) describes as to “constantly compare” (p. 199).

Elaborating further, Merriam writes:

The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated. (2009, pp. 199-200)

As the study continued and I analyzed additional materials, constant comparative methods allowed me to “[employ] cycles of data collection, analysis, and interpretation . . . to compare data more or less continuously” (Sowell, 2001, p. 147).

By the time I had coded all of the data for this study, it became evident that the data answering my first research question (i.e., the characteristics and practices of Young Voices Rise) described a community of practice. For example, I realized that what I was calling “Reach,” Wenger (1998) referred to as “Boundary” and “Brokering.” At this stage, adopting Wenger’s (1998) community of practice framework helped me to see the data in new ways and explore the data in more detail. For example, what I had termed simply “Roles,” I could now break into “Core Group,” “Active Participants,” “Occasional

Participants,” “Peripheral Participants,” and “Transactional Participants” (Wenger & Trayner, 2011). At this point I used selective coding and organization to align my findings to community of practice terminology where there were overlaps. Doing so allowed me to interrogate the data to a greater degree.

The data associated with research questions two and three (i.e., regarding participants’ views of their writing and perceived changes through YVR participation) in some ways speak to Wenger’s (1998) ideas about imagination and identification. However, interrogating the codes with these components of community of practice theory did not result in any changes to the codes themselves. (Please see Appendix B for an outline of findings.)

### *Analytic Memos*

Throughout the study, I composed analytic memos (Saldana, 2009) in response to data collection and data analysis events. These memos created a space for me to process observations and initial connections. Sometimes these reflections resulted in new codes. Sometimes in this space I challenged previous ideas I had, or I wrote notes to myself about future follow-up needed. Research memos took the following form:

<b>Research Memo</b>	Date: _____
Research Event: _____	
Reflection ( <i>impressions, surprises, preliminary findings, new categories, etc.</i> ): _____	
Follow-Up Needed: _____	
(Note: Extra blank lines have been deleted here to save space.)	

Occasionally, I reread earlier memos to see if I had completed the follow-up I had said I needed to do or to see if earlier impressions had amounted to anything later.

### *Member Checks*

I also conducted member checks (Merriam, 2009) throughout this study. When findings about YVR were first starting to emerge from the data, I sought feedback from adolescent participants. Specifically, during our second interview, I asked adolescent participants to comment on the following codes: (1) Mentoring, (2) Connections to the outside world, (3) Safe space, and (4) Music. Their comments helped me to see that I was on track with my observations regarding these areas.

The most significant way I used member checking was to share a participant's transcripts with him or her after the person had completed his or her part in the study. I asked for any changes. As Brenner (2006) suggests to researchers, this process gives participants opportunities to make "corrections to the transcript or even further elaborations as an informant reflects on what was said during the interview" (p. 368). Participants did not ask for changes to these transcripts.

Brenner also recommends sharing results with some of the participants in the study to check that participants agree with the findings: "Toward the end of a project, a researcher can choose to give written reports to informants for feedback and reaction" (2006, p. 368). After data analysis was finished, I provided three of the participants with select findings and asked for their responses. I asked Gabriel to verify findings about the group's characteristics and practices. Specifically, I asked him to respond to findings about purposes, challenges, and creating a safe space. As he initially began reading, he

said that “safe space” should be included in the group’s purpose. However, he was satisfied when he saw I had made it a category of its own. He also said that their rules are really ground rules, so I renamed that category based on his suggestion. For the adolescent participants, I asked Stacey and Jasmine to verify findings dealing with perceptions of how they have changed through YVR. I had them look at categories of personal changes, writing-related changes, and changes in other areas to see which changes applied to them. They agreed with the list of changes, and they did not suggest additional areas.

### *Data Analysis Software*

NVivo, the qualitative data management program, was an important tool for data analysis in this study. The “nodes” in this program linked interview and observation transcripts, field notes, Facebook posts, adolescents’ poems, and participant information forms. The software allowed me to reach across various data sources, which was important with hundreds of pages of data.

This data analysis program did not just help me with efficiency, but it also helped me interrogate the data in some new ways. For example, I could search for terms across data sources and see the number of times a term appeared in each source. I could also build a word tree for a term, pulling all uses of a term and showing words before and after the term. (See Appendix B for a word tree for the term “safe space.”)

## CHAPTER 4

### GROUP FINDINGS

*“Effective learning situations must approximate as closely as possible what real practitioners know and do in the world. This requires a culture of immediate use, a social context of learning together, an apprenticeship into a community of practice, and assistance over time that guides the learner into the deep understandings and practices of that community.”* -- Smith & Wilhelm (2006, p. 156)

What are the characteristics and practices of Young Voices Rise (YVR), a group of spoken word poets in the urban Southwest? This chapter answers this question by providing an overview of YVR and describing how the group offers multiple possibilities for engagement and a safe space for storytelling.

#### **An Overview of Young Voices Rise**

This section provides an overview of YVR in terms of the group’s history, attendees, settings, practices, tools, purposes, and challenges.

#### **Group History: “Man, keep that money”**

Mark started a poetry group at a high school in 2009. He talked to me a bit about how that group eventually evolved into the YVR poetry group that exists today:

I had just started making money as a poet full time. I worked at [the high school] for free because I was helping this teacher . . . take these kids to



Brave New Voices, the largest international poetry youth festival in the world. He wanted me to coach, so we partnered up. We had a poetry group that was consistently 10-15 kids but probably like 30 deep. These kids would show up every day after school. And we would write and talk and hang out. [The teacher] moved away, and the teachers that were at that school were not really supportive of the group. I wanted to move it out . . . because the bureaucracy of trying to get the plane tickets approved through the district and like the district coordinator there was really not cool, and it was a huge headache. So I wanted to move it out of that institution and . . . start what you see at the library now. Before [Gabriel] came into the picture, [YVR] was essentially a very small community youth poetry slam with workshops where like each summer, you know, 5-7 kids who made the slam team would invade my apartment, and I would feed them, and they would practice for like 4-5 hours per day. And then I would raise all their money for them with help from a couple friends. And then I'd take them to Brave New Voices. That's where it started. I was probably teaching like a monthly workshop at the [local] art museum to [YVR] kids. They gave me space. They were the first to kind of house us. That's when I heard about [Gabriel] because one of my students told me that this dude [Gabriel] was teaching at their school on the South side, and he was like, "Trust me. You'd like this guy." [Gabriel] and I frequented the same open mic, but I didn't really know him. A couple of months later, [Gabriel] called me and really convinced me to be a part of this play thing

he was putting on. I didn't know him, and I was like, "All right, all right."

I told him that I didn't work for free, so he offered me \$100, which was a lot for him to do, you know. But then I did this play. I told him I could only do one rehearsal and that was it. So I did my one rehearsal and then I showed up for the show and did my part of the play, performed my poem, and I watched the show, and the show was incredible. It was great.

Amazing. Like super awesome. So I was like, I told him, "Man, keep that money. This was great. This was beautiful. Good for you. You worked hard." And that started our friendship. Six months later he started to really revolutionize and market and brand the community slam event. Each year it gets more attendance. It's really thriving. So he's really responsible for a lot of that. (interview, June 24, 2014)

In this passage, Mark describes how YVR evolved. While the group started out in a school, Mark realized he needed an umbrella organization to better control the group's funding and to escape the bureaucracy of the school district and its personnel.

When I entered Young Voices Rise in September of 2013, it was just beginning its second season in its current iteration, which Gabriel and Mark defined as an academic year that consisted of a Town Slam. Even within the year I observed them, the group grew. Gabriel pointed out that they went from having 10 to 20 contestants at slams during the 2013-2014 season. He also noted that the makeup of the audience at slams was changing. The audience used to be about 75% adults and 25% young people, and that ratio had finally flipped.

## **Attendees and Settings: “It was standing room only”**

### *People at Workshops*

The number of people who frequent YVR events varies from event to event, but some poets turn up regularly throughout the year. My field notes showed that participation in the writing workshops ranged between 17 to 30 participants. At the first workshop of the season, all 23 of the participants were female. However, at other events male writers were present, and the workshop in January was split more evenly by gender. Sometimes parents would accompany their children, but this usually only happened when younger kids (i.e., grade school aged) attended, which was rare. Most participants were high school students or others up to age 19. Other attendees have included teachers who sponsor high school poetry clubs, YVR teaching artists, guest teaching artists, family members of Gabriel or Mark, and professors from a local university. The adolescent writers at these workshops would often trickle in throughout the event, and sometimes there would be a scramble to bring in more chairs.

### *People at Slams*

According to my field notes throughout the year, poetry slams attracted 31 to 90 audience members, including the presenting poets. The preliminary slam in April brought in so many people that the group had to find another location for their May event. As Gabriel posted to the group’s Facebook account on April 20:

The turn out at yesterday's [YVR] Slam Championship qualifier was incredible. It was standing room only. The security guard told me we were well past fire code but instead of shutting us down, she took a video to

send to her sister because she was so impressed with what these young people were saying! I am so blessed to be [a] part of such a beautiful community. In just one year[']s time we have doubled our number of youth participants! People lie but numbers don't. These youth want and need a place to let their voice be heard. Thank you all for your blessings and support. Championship will [be] May 3rd! I will send out details as soon as the venue is confirmed. We can't break fire code again so we will have to host it somewhere else! Good problem to have! (online post, retrieved May 23, 2014)

The poetry slams attracted friends, family members, and supporters from the community to a greater degree than workshops did. While the workshops focused on writing, the slams focused on supporting young people's voices, so anyone could attend and show support. One of the great strengths of YVR is the way it brings together people of different ages and experiences at these events. These "intergenerational perspectives [can help] students find purpose in literacy while situating themselves in a historical continuum" (Fisher, 2005a, p. 128).

#### *Locations for Workshops and Slams*

YVR typically held their events in one of the many rooms in the library. As discussed in Chapter 3, these spaces included an area in the teen center where there were café rounds, a large room with sections for various purposes (e.g., computers, tables, storage), a wood-paneled lecture room, a small room downstairs, or an auditorium near the entrance. Events sometimes took place elsewhere. The Town Slam took place at a city

center for the arts located about an hour's drive from the library. This event drew students from high school poetry clubs from all of the surrounding cities. The final slam took place outdoors at a center for the arts located next door to the library. A movie viewing was held at a religious community center, also next door to the library. The July workshop and slam events were held at an art museum across town. The 45-minute driving distance between the museum and the library meant that the event attracted a slightly different crowd. Most regulars did not venture out to the museum that day.

### **Practices and Tools: “You got stories”**

Recall that Goncu and Gauvain (2012) write, “According to Leont’ev, human development is a process of development of consciousness as a function of participation in activity. Through the use of tools that mediate the individuals’ interactions with one another and with objects, members of a community both appropriate the skills needed in accomplishing the job and construct awareness about them” (Goncu & Gauvain, 2012, p. 135). Throughout the 2013-2014 season, I observed members learning through participation in spoken word poetry activities, which included using tools and interacting with others. YVR follows some predictable routines and practices; however, I found variation in their activities as well.

### *Writing Workshop Routines and Practices*

Writing workshops almost always began with introductions. Each participant would share his or her name and favorite color or grade—something low-risk enough that everyone would be willing to do it. Sometimes the workshop leader would spend time on

a person's name or go back to it later to review. Although these workshops were only 90 minutes long and there was no guarantee a writer would be back the next week, the group leaders made a point of investing time in learning names.

Several writing workshops involved language review of some kind. The workshop in mid-October involved reviewing the parts of speech, listing examples, and then combining those into a nonsense poem. (See the opening pages of Chapter 1.) Synonyms and antonyms were also discussed in that workshop. Sometimes participants would be encouraged to reflect on the power of various parts of speech. For example, at the workshop in March, Gabriel asked, "What is more important in your poetry, adjectives or verbs?" In this revision workshop, participants were expected to bring a poem that needed work, and Gabriel had them look at their poems and consider whether they were using "strong verbs," which "keep it moving" and contribute to the "dramatic arc" (observation, March 15, 2014).

Another common practice in writing workshops was for participants to work with a mentor text. In the workshop in mid-October, Mark used Julie Sheehan's poem "Hate Poem" and had participants write poems of their own that included a similar level of detail and sarcasm. In the workshop in November, Mark read participants Ted Kooser's poem "The Abandoned Farmhouse," and then asked participants to make lists of abandoned places, choose one of them, and list out details about the abandoned place. Participants used these lists to craft poems that they then shared. Mark ultimately used mentor texts as springboards for poetry writing activities; however, before getting to that step, he would spend a lot of time immersing students in the language of the poem. For example, with the Kooser poem, he said, "Okay, so something bad happened. Do we

know what happened? . . . Why? How is this being communicated to us?” (observation, November 23, 2013). Mark constantly had students go back to the text—or when he did not bring copies for everyone, he would ask them to think back to a place in the text—to collect evidence. Mark demanded careful reading and listening.

Discussions of mentor texts sometimes included labeling the poetic devices at work, but never in a tedious way. For example, as they were discussing Kooser’s poem, Mark asked, “What’s ‘like branches after a storm’? What kind of poetic device is that? Simile. A comparison” (observation, November 23, 2013). When he introduced the writing activity that would accompany this poem, he said, “Point of view. This is an exercise in point of view. You’re using the viewpoint of the space to tell the story most of the time” (observation, November 23, 2013).

In the revision workshop in March, Gabriel used a video as a mentor text. Participants viewed a group poem performance from a Brave New Voices competition. Then Gabriel led a discussion about some of the techniques used, including repetition, humor, and timing. He also used this example as an opportunity to bring up the differences between narrative and lyrical poems.

In the workshop at the art museum in July, Gabriel read a poem of his own as a mentor text. Then he led the following discussion: “What was my story about? . . . Where was love? . . . Yeah, when I was holding his hand, right? . . . Was there sadness in that story? What were some of the sounds that you heard? . . . The oxygen machine, right? What did you see? A cigarette butt, right? . . . I took these five senses, and I grounded this story in very concrete details. So I want you to show me where the story is” (observation, July 19, 2014). Gabriel’s own poem served as a model for what participants could

produce out of their brainstorming activities about home and how it smells, looks, sounds, tastes, and feels.

Writing workshops did not always follow the standard format of learning names, doing writing exercises, and sharing. Occasionally guest instructors would come and teach in their own ways. In late October, a professor from a local university delivered a presentation on the performing arts program at his school and how to get into college in general. Gabriel, who is a student in this particular college program, followed up his mentor's presentation with an activity on goal setting and arranged a tour of the college center in the library. In January, a well-known guest poet from California led the workshop. He had students do tongue twister warm ups and writing exercises around various words. In February, one of YVR's teaching artists, along with her mentor professor from Philadelphia, led a workshop based on various principles of humanity. This workshop was sponsored through a humanities program at a local university. The March workshop was different from some others because it involved students bringing their poems and sharing them with partners. Usually poems were written in the workshop and shared one-at-a-time with the whole group listening. In the July workshop at an art museum, participants had the chance to tour the gallery, hear poems by YVR "ambassador" poets that were written in response to photographs in the space, and write poems of their own based on this special collection of photographs. As these variations suggest, participants in the writing workshops had access to a range of people, resources, and writing experiences throughout the year.

Many of these activities—including language review, mentor text work, editing workshops, college application preparation, and writing in response to art—look similar



to the kinds of activities students experience in school. YVR teaching artists bridge the worlds of formal academic literacies and poets' out-of-school interests, fostering a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004; Soja, 1996) that contains elements of both school and community. In this space, young people are motivated to learn—and on their Saturdays, no less.

In addition, YVR routines demonstrate that "writing involves dialogic processes of invention," as Prior argues (2006, p. 58). Teaching artists, like classroom teachers, influence members' writing through the activities they make available. Writers influence each other. Past experiences influence writers. As Prior acknowledges, writing "extend[s] beyond the moment of transcription and [crosses] modes and media (reading, writing, talk, visual representation, material objectification)" (2006, p. 58). Many factors contribute to the work that is actually produced by YVR writers.

### *Slam Routines and Practices*

Slam procedures tended to follow some basic patterns and had much less variation. For example, in all of the slams for the 2013-2014 season, either Gabriel or Mark hosted the event. At the Town Slam, the two men hosted the event together. There were never any cases of guests coming in from outside to run a slam. The slam at the art museum in July was an un-scored event, which was rare.

A slam follows a predictable pattern. The host kicks off the slam by counting down and then launching into a poem. This is done without first greeting the audience or introducing the poem. Not even the title of the poem is given. Starting the slam in this way quickly grabs the attention of audience members and pulls them into the event. After

the poem, the host greets the audience and welcomes them to the slam.

Several more things must happen before any of the adolescent poets perform. The host will ask who has never been to a slam before and explain how a poetry slam works. Judges assign scores to the poem (from what I noticed, these scores usually range between 7.5 and 10), and it is the audience's job to react, either cheering or booing the scores. Sometimes the host will introduce the judges and say something interesting about each one. Usually the judges are people gathered randomly from the library at the break. They are not expected to have any knowledge of the group, the poets, or even poetry. Selecting judges in this way is supposed to have the effect of valuing the most powerful poems in any slam. However, "score creep" is a very real phenomenon, and the poets who go later in the slam usually end up with higher scores than those before them. As scoring practice for the judges—and reaction practice for the audience—the host will usually bring up a "sacrificial poet." As Gabriel explains, "What we do before we start is we have to warm the judges up. We have to give them an opportunity to get their skills prepared. So we have a sacrificial poet who is not a part of the slam, who doesn't win anything. They just get up here. They shed blood for the sake of the poetry slam" (observation, January 18, 2014). Usually the sacrificial poet is an adult teaching artist within YVR (i.e., someone who oversees a poetry club at a high school). If Mark is a deejay at a slam, he might also be a sacrificial poet that day.

Another important group practice is warming up the crowd. The host puts a lot of emphasis on getting the crowd pumped up for the slam. The host may ask for a "Yah, yah," and the crowd is expected to repeat it. Group traditions like using the phrase, "Put the bun in the oven and turn it up" are introduced, and audience members are even

encouraged to do the *grito* (i.e., an “aaaaaaaaa ha ha ha hi,” a familiar call in mariachi music). These call and response practices function to get the audience enthused and to let them know early on in the slam that their participation is valued. They are told that they should snap, clap, cheer, and comment in response to poems they hear. As Gabriel says:

So if you hear a poet come up here, and you hear what they say, and you enjoy what they say, please do not wait until the poet is done to share the love. We’re at a poetry slam, and part of the culture is you let the poet know right there in the moment that they are doing a great job, that you appreciate what they say. You can snap your fingers. You can say, “Uh.” Everybody do that, “Uh.” [The crowd repeats it.] You can say, “Spit that stuff.” [The crowd repeats it.] Normally we would say the profane version of “stuff,” but there are little kids in here so, “Spit that.” You can say, “Preach.” You can go, “Oh.” Whatever it is that moves you. Sometimes there are poets who just say things [that] make you go, “Mmm.”

(interview, January 18, 2014)

Rather than interrupting, this practice serves to let the poet know she or he is doing a good job. Gabriel compares this behavior to call and response practices in some churches:

When you go to church, well not every church, but at least churches that . . . , I can’t say that [talking to someone in the audience], you don’t wait for the pastor to be done before you let the pastor know that you are appreciating what is being said. If you like what the pastor’s saying, and you like what the poet is saying, you can give them that energy, right? You just snap your fingers. You’re like, “Yeah, say that. Spit that. Uh.

Yeah.” You know what I’m saying? (observation, May 10, 2014)

Sometimes the host will see that it is necessary to warm up the crowd again later in the slam. Audience members might be encouraged to stand up and dance or stretch, do a soul clap, or shout back a “Yah, yah.” These breaks occurred more frequently as the season progressed, more poets were scheduled to read, and the slams went on longer and longer.

During the rest of the slam, poets come up one by one. The host announces who is up and who is “on deck” (i.e., next). The deejay plays music, and the audience claps and cheers as the poet makes his or her way to the microphone. The host usually greets the poet at the microphone and adjusts the microphone stand to the right height. The audience snaps, claps, cheers, and comments during the poem, and afterwards, music plays and the crowd will clap some more as the poet returns to her or his seat. After this, the host returns to the microphone, thanks the poet, and maybe says a few words about the poem or about the poet. Sometimes the host will tell a funny story at this point or make an announcement, passing time as the judges score the poem and prepare the results for the host. Then the host will read the scores from low to high, and the audience will react as they see fit. This routine continues until all of the poets have gone. As the final scores for the slam are being tabulated, a visiting poet or a teaching artist might perform a piece. More announcements will be made. After the three or four winners of the slam are announced, the host might say that the scores really do not matter. Then the host will remind audience members to pick up the space (i.e., this usually involves stacking chairs) and to meet someone new. Music plays as the poets and other audience members stay to mingle with each other.

## *Technology*

Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers (2013) suggest, “Today’s technologies have forged new ways that young people can engage with words and ideas” (p. 677).

Technology creates opportunities for those in YVR. They have a Facebook page where reminders and other news are posted. Announcements provide the details of upcoming events. Sometimes Facebook posts thank supporters or comment on what a great event they just had. During the 2013-2014 season, YVR switched their schedule around. They moved to the second and fourth Saturdays (instead of first and third as in the previous season), and eventually they moved to holding just one event per month. The group’s Facebook page, which has hundreds of followers, keeps members informed in between events. Also, as events were coming closer, members could click “join” if they planned to attend. Professional-looking announcements complete with the YVR logo were posted to its Facebook page. However, YVR also posted announcements for other events going on around town. Gabriel posted his dance performance, for example, and when a famous spoken word poet was in town to perform at an adult venue, Gabriel let people know about it. Wenger writes, “Any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form” (1998, p. 59). The group’s Facebook posts reify group values and expectations.

The online aspect of YVR helped to keep the group connected between their monthly gatherings. Additionally, when the group was together, Gabriel encouraged audience members to help him expand the group’s online presence: “If you have a cell phone device, which I know most of you guys do, please be kind enough to take it out of your pocket right now, make sure it is on silent, and before you put it back in your

pocket, take a picture of me. And tag [YVR]. It's about being something bigger than you are" (observation, March 15, 2014). The group also made special announcements recognizing sponsors, both on Facebook and at live events. When we were at the art museum in July, Gabriel encouraged everyone to "like" the museum's page.

Technology is an important tool for performers. Most poets do not have their poems memorized, so the majority look at their phones while performing. Others read poems from printouts or from their journals. Technology is important for deejays as well. They bring devices like iPods or laptops to connect to the sound system, and sometimes they use the Internet to find a song clip. I did not realize how important the use of the Internet was to the deejay until the final slam in May. This event was held outdoors at a city center for the arts, and the lack of Internet affected the deejay's—Mark's—speed and selection. At that event, Gabriel said, "We don't have Internet out here, so [Mark]'s struggling" (observation, May 10, 2014). Mark also forgot to bring a charger for his laptop, which prompted Gabriel to ask the audience if anyone could lend them one. At an event in March, Gabriel showed a video of a group poem; however, he did not bring external speakers, so it was hard for everyone in the room to hear the poem, and it was also a challenge to see what was on his laptop screen. The college readiness workshop in October was more organized. This event took place in the lecture room, which has a built in screen and LCD projector, and the visiting professor delivered a presentation with slides.

### *Music*

Music is a key tool for members of YVR. Nicole, Rafael, and Jasmine discussed

the role of music at slams and in their lives as writers:

**Wendy:** Talk to me about music.

**Nicole:** Music is so important in the poetry slams. Poetry slams that don't have any music while the poets are transitioning are really awkward. After the claps go away, if the emcee isn't on the mic right away, there's an awkward silence, and the slam loses its vibe.

**Rafael:** Yeah.

**Jasmine:** The music keeps the vibe going.

**Nicole:** It helps the slam progress.

**Rafael:** Especially if it's a good deejay, and they're the right songs.

**Nicole:** Yeah, because they don't want to play a super happy song when someone just went up there and gave their heart out and did the most sad story of their life, and then someone plays some happy song. It kind of messes up the vibe of the crowd. The deejay's important, being able to feel what music to play next, and what's going to work and what's not.

**Rafael:** From an artistic point of view, music kind of like inspires us. You know, when we're writing, we all have our earphones in because our musics don't really mix well. But yeah, music's really important on the mic and off the mic. (interview, March 22, 2014)

As they explain here, music extends the conversation of the poem, which makes the deejay's role in the slam a vital one. Music is also used to break up the slam and revitalize the audience. Sometimes this involves a dance break. At one slam, Gabriel said, "I encourage you to just get up. Stand. Don't go nowhere. Stay in your zone, okay? Shake

it off. Just close your eyes. Dance like no one's watching" (observation, January 18, 2014). At the Town Slam, which is a celebration of the poets in the high school clubs, I noticed that songs contributed to the festive atmosphere. Songs at this event were played longer between the poems, and people stood up and danced when the deejay played a song from Mark's album.

Music also plays a role in these young writers' lives. Five of the six adolescent participants in this study mentioned having an interest in making music of some kind. Jasmine is involved with bands in and out of school, singing, playing guitar, and playing keyboard. In fact, she started singing verses in her spoken word poems by the end of the season. Nicole and Shawna are also guitar players. Several participants—Jorge, Nicole, and Rafael—mentioned writing raps, and of course the group leader, Mark, recently released his own album. Despite this interest in music, I did not observe any of the adolescent participants in this study perform a rap during a slam. Sometimes outsiders would come in and perform a song, but these were usually not taken very seriously. In one instance, three visitors sang a song they had heard on the radio. Gabriel was kind in his response, but he encouraged them to do more the next time:

Um, so this is beautiful, and I love singing other people's stuff. I listen to it. I want you to examine that song and why you connect to it and just understand that you can write a song just as important as that one in your own language. A lot of times we feel like we can't do it because we hear it on the radio, but that's not true. You can write your own language. You can write your own story. That was a story with a message. But you write your story. You got stories. I know the three of you got stories, so I want



you to see why you connected to that song—what was the emotional connection—and then find your own story, and then I want you to bust a move the next time with your own personal stories. Cool? Yeah?

(observation, October 26, 2013)

While music has an important relationship to spoken word poetry, a song is not to be confused with a spoken word poem.

### *Other Tools*

Because the group meets in borrowed spaces, they have to bring along their own equipment and supplies. Several times leaders of poetry workshops commented on what they did not have. Mark said, “We don’t have a whiteboard” (observation, October 12, 2013). He wanted to write something down for all of the participants to see, but he had no way to do that. When a pair of teaching artists taught in February, they brought along a handmade poster spelling out the various principles of humanity they were going to discuss in their workshop. These presenters, an elementary school teacher and a professor of education, anticipated what they would need, and they brought their materials along with them. Sometimes participants in workshops did not bring paper or pens with them. I started carrying extras; however, other poets were also generous in finding an extra pencil or sharing papers from their spiral notebooks. Occasionally an event would be sponsored through a local university, and pizza, snacks, shirts, buttons, and prizes would be distributed. At the museum event in July, the museum provided chips, pretzels, granola bars, popcorn, and water. As most events were held between 12:00 and 4:00, which sometimes felt long, participants understandably appreciated the snacks.

**Purposes: “Be a part of something”**

*Supporting Writing*

Young Voices Rise is driven by multiple purposes, and one of these is to support writing. Specifically, YVR puts kids in touch with spoken word poetry. As Gabriel explained in a writing workshop:

The workshop is designed for you to become more comfortable with writing and expressing yourself through the written language, which eventually then will turn into the oral language, if you so choose to spit your poetry. But it’s really designed for you to grow as a writer.

Everybody here is going to be equal. So don’t be afraid, ‘Oh, my poem is not that good,’ or ‘I don’t know how to write.’ That’s what it’s here for.

That’s what the workshop is here for, to help you become a better writer.

And a poem is, you just put that pen to the paper, embrace it. Eventually you will develop the skills and become a great writer. All great writers will tell you the same thing. Nothing happens overnight. It’s a process of writing, revision, working at it over and over and over again. So that’s what the workshop is for. So have fun with it. (observation, February 15, 2014)

Gabriel and Mark make many resources available to young people to help them improve their writing. The Saturday writing workshops offer focused practice, and participants are encouraged to read their work aloud. At writing workshops and poetry slams, YVR writers come in contact with more experienced mentors and mentor texts. Adult teaching

artists share their works at the poetry slams, and sometimes published pieces by professional poets are used in workshops. These people and poems offer young writers glimpses into the future, providing possibilities for what a writer might become or produce. Some might say there is a kind of apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1995) in play here as younger poets align themselves to more experienced ones. Also, Mark and Gabriel seem to bring learners into zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) as they meet writers where they are and help move them toward new understandings.

### *Developing Multiple Literacies*

This writing group exists to teach much more than writing skills. Gabriel said, “Our main focus is not writing. Our main focus is emotional literacy, oral literacy, [and] cultural literacy” (interview, June 5, 2014). They strive to help kids with their speaking and listening skills, but group members also believe poetry can help kids develop emotionally and become more accepting of other cultures.

When I asked Mark if YVR helps adolescent members with anything other than writing, he replied, “Yeah. Life. Addiction. Abuse. Trauma. Reflection. Making decisions. Navigating the future. Expressing themselves. Navigating fear. Embracing their own unique output of thoughts and energy and all that” (interview, June 24, 2014). He believes that poetry can help kids overcome the challenges life will throw at them.

### *Celebrating Voices*

Another purpose of this group is to celebrate the voices of adolescents. In fact, in looking over the data corpus, I found that participants referred to the purpose of the group

as sharing voices approximately four times as often as improving writing. As Gabriel said at the final slam-off of the year, “The most important thing is that we’re creating spaces for young people to share their voice” (observation, May 10, 2014). In another slam, Gabriel elaborated on this idea:

Energy, love, we are celebrating young peoples’ voices. And public speaking is the number one fear in the world, but we really believe that if we can teach these young people and empower them to exercise their right to speak, and they can do it and articulate themselves in a beautiful way, and they can see that adults and their peers are accepting and loving of that, we believe we can create a change in the world that we live in. (observation, October 26, 2013)

According to Gabriel, supporting the voices of young people can have multiple effects. The speaker is empowered. At the same time, the message enters a larger community and is absorbed into it, creating change. These poems are utterances that occur within a larger conversation, evoking Bakhtin’s (1986) metaphor of communication as links in a chain.

Mark also discussed the importance of sharing voices:

The reason why I wanted to start [YVR] is I knew what it was like as a young person to feel isolated and have no real outlet to speak about my own pain, my own issues. [Performing for] an audience . . . changed me. It absolutely changed me. And it made me heal, to a degree. Because I was like up, facing it. I’m visible, you know. This idea of invisibility dictates so much of how young people live their lives. Teen suicide, car wrecks, teens are the most at-risk population. And a lot of it is because young

people feel so often that they're isolated. And these kids go, "No one will understand this about me, but this is just how I am, and my pain is so unique or so different, or can't be understood," you know. And then what happens when you take this poetry culture and you put it in a room and you develop a safe space for young people to speak to each other, then you see some kid read a poem about abuse or whatever and you see the minds of their peers open up. And they go, "Oh shit. Your parents got a divorce too? Wow. Except for my mom is actually more like your dad in my situation." But then they go, "We're not alone. We're not alone. And our stories run together and they're similar." You know? And then you have this incredible . . . sense of community and appreciation for everyone's story. (interview, June 24, 2014)

In the above excerpt, Mark describes at least two benefits of speaking up. First, it can be therapeutic for the speaker. "Poetry is healing ourselves. And that's the first step to healing is to put it out there," Gabriel said (observation, February 15, 2014). Moreover, sharing stories can provide relief to a listener who realizes he or she is not alone. By sharing our stories, we can work through our problems but also help others around us who are facing similar challenges.

Celebrating the voices of young people is an important purpose of YVR. Poets speak to "a community of listeners" (Weiss & Herndon, 2001, p. 83) and may engage in wounded healing together (Hill, 2009). They "construct their own voiced response[s]" (Dyson, 2005, p. 155) to issues and events that are larger than one person. Jocson (2008), who has done extensive work on youth spoken word poetry, argues, "The sharing of

experiences through writing and reading further validates the students' identities" (p. 169). When young people's different ways with words (Heath, 1983) are expressed and valued, they can change the community itself. In this way, YVR is a wonderful model for schools.

### *Valuing Education*

YVR tries to help young people see the importance of education. In the place of the standard writing workshop in late October, YVR brought in a professor from a local university to talk about the steps involved with applying to college. Afterwards, the group took a tour of the college center that is housed within the library. The Facebook announcement that came out before this event emphasized the importance of this particular workshop: "Education is very important to us, so this Saturday we are dedicating our workshop time to a college readiness presentation! Please come out and/or let any student (no matter what grade level) [know] about this opportunity" (online post, retrieved October 24, 2013). During the college workshop, Gabriel explained to the group why they were doing something different: "A lot of you know that I just enrolled as a student, and I could talk about that journey for hours, but the journey of getting enrolled into college is crazy. There's a lot of confusion, and there's a lot of steps in the process, that you need to go through, so we're dedicating some of our workshop time to navigating that" (observation, October 26, 2013). At various points in this study, Gabriel talked about his hope to be the person in these kids' lives that he never had growing up. Guiding them toward higher education seems to be one of the ways he hopes to mentor the young people in YVR. This finding is in line with what Fisher (2005a) found with

spoken word poetry groups as well: they can inspire adolescents to pursue higher education.

### *Facilitating Competition*

Another purpose of YVR is to facilitate competition. Some of the young people talked to me about how they are motivated by the competition. They like it. Teaching artists played up competition at various times, especially at the beginning of the season and again at the end. When Gabriel explained the poetry slam to guests at the preliminary slam off, he said, “Those of you who don’t know what a poetry slam is, it’s a competition where young people are going to come up here and [share] poems that they have written themselves” (observation, April 19, 2014). Sometimes Gabriel was more specific about what was at stake: “These young people are competing to earn a spot on our Brave New Voices youth poetry international slam team” (observation, March 14, 2014). At the preliminary slam in April, Gabriel explained that only 4 of the 20 poets would make the team.

While competition is a part of what YVR does, the group leaders also emphasize that competition is not an end goal. Gabriel said:

The reason why we slam is . . . competition drives us. It drives you to push yourself. You create an energy around competition. So I think, at least for us, and the philosophy that we’ve developed . . . from organizations and movements like Louder Than a Bomb, really finding that balance and making sure that your audience and your students understand that yes it’s a competition, and allow that competition to push you to do better, to win.

But also understand that, like the young man said in [the movie *Louder Than a Bomb*], ‘The point is the poetry. The point is the community.’ And one thing that was really beautiful was that he said that he never talked to this one particular guy, and because of this slam, and the competition, they were brought in the same place, and they shared these stories, and they made a connection, and now they’re friends. So the competition, the slam, brings everybody together because we like competition. (observation, April 19, 2014)

Even while announcing winners, Gabriel puts the competition in perspective: “And if you didn’t win, just remember . . . it’s all good. Keep writing. Keep coming here. The point is the poetry and not the score. Can we all say that together?” (observation, October 12, 2013). Sometimes group leaders simultaneously humble those who won and nurture those who did not. For example, Mark announced:

Just remember this about the poetry slam. It doesn’t matter. Seriously. I’ve seen all kinds of slam greats do nothing with their careers because they think they’re hot on the mic and all of a sudden, they can’t go anywhere. This is a nice crowd. They’re here to support you, right. This is where you want to get nurturing. But just because you do well doesn’t mean, “I have graduated to slam kingdom and I am the bomb.” No. It takes work and work and work and work. You need to bring your poetry everywhere, all kinds of rooms. So it’s good to feel proud, but ultimately, separating first, second, and third place is literally a tenth of a point. 29.1, 29.2, 29.3. That’s the difference. It’s a tenth of a point. It doesn’t mean anything. That



could have been the judge got tired for a moment and was like, “I need to do my laundry,” and made that tenth different. That’s how simple it is.

Victory is like that. There’s a whole lot of strategy to slam, but ultimately this is like playing poker, okay. The order you go in determines the lot, okay. So don’t put too much value into this whole game. It’s a fun game, a cool game, but it’s a game. It’s a gimmick. That being said, if you don’t win, that’s all right. You won because you got up here. You won because you got on the mic. That’s what it’s about. (observation, November 23, 2013)

YVR leaders caution participants to see beyond the game at the same time everyone is wrapped up in playing it.

Competition does provide an authentic audience and purpose for YVR members’ writing. They know that others will be listening to their words, and they might even win a competition. Vygotsky cautioned that “writing [should not be] given to [students] from without, from the teacher’s hands,” as if it is a “technical skill such as piano playing”; rather, students should be “involved in the essence of the music itself” (1978, pp. 105-106). As young people compete, they also publicly take responsibility for the crafting of their poems.

### *Contributing Citizens*

One of YVR’s goals is to create “caring citizens of the world” (interview, June 5, 2014). Mark said they aimed to not only “cultivate the minds of new, emerging artists” but also to encourage adolescents to contribute something to the world (interview with

Gabriel, June 24, 2014). Gabriel spoke about this at the final slam off: “We say this to our young people: Poetry is just a medium for us to talk about what’s going on, but if all you’re doing is talking, then don’t expect to see too many changes. And I’ll just remind us all of that. I mean, like, yes, it’s important to talk about it, but also be an active citizen in the world. Go out there. Do your community service. Be a part of something” (observation, May 10, 2014). Language is powerful, but it is not a substitute for action.

### **Challenges: “Help us out!”**

Because YVR is a relatively young group, it was interesting watching them grow over the course of the year as they faced new challenges.

#### *Dealing with Growth*

One of the challenges the group faced was simply dealing with their increasing numbers. As membership grew, Mark and Gabriel realized they needed to host functions less often, and they switched from two events per month to just one per month. They also had to adjust how they selected their Brave New Voices team. For the first time ever, they had to have a preliminary slam leading up to the final slam-off. As Gabriel explained, “It’s because we’ve grown so much that we can’t do the slam-off in one day” (observation, March 15, 2014). Their growing numbers led to other challenges as well. At the event in January, Gabriel said, “We are working on the air situation. This is a good problem to have for us, so many people in here, it’s hot. We’ve got a fan back there. And we’ll work on it, so please bear with us. Okay? It’s not even summer” (observation, January 18, 2014). The preliminary slam that took place three months later was so

crowded that the next event had to be moved elsewhere.

This growth seemed to lead to some confusion and inconsistency at times. At a slam early in the season, Gabriel told the audience the following:

Every time you slam, you get one point for slamming, right? Then you get three points if you win, two points if you get second, one point if you get third. So if you win, you get a total of four points. During the slam off, the person who has the most points gets to go last. Everybody knows the person who goes last is in the best position because the judges do what's called a score creep. So, the more you participate, the better the chances you have. (observation, October 12, 2013)

However, this system was not actually followed in practice. At the preliminary slam in April, everyone drew numbers from a hat to determine their order between 1-20. The poets who had shown up every time, slammed every time, and even placed multiple times throughout the season were subject to the same luck of the draw as a poet who had just showed up for the first time that day. Nicole, a participant in this study who is a devoted member of YVR—and who, based on her record of placing throughout the year and her perfect attendance, should have been guaranteed a spot on the Brave New Voices team—drew the first position. She was the “shotgun poet” of the preliminary slam. Gabriel discussed how this went wrong:

Even if you have just 10 people, the person who goes in the first slot, like the shotgun position, statistically, no matter how good they are, rarely ever makes it out of the first round. So what you do in the championship is all season long, you always do the random draw, to keep it random, but each

time you show up and you slam, you get a certain amount of points. Each time you win, you get a certain amount of points. And at the end of the season, what you do is you calculate all of the points and that's your positioning for the slam off. So for [Nicole's] sake, had we done it the way where we calculated points, she would never have gone first in the slam off. When you're first of 20 kids, you're not going to make it. And you only have one poem. So technically [Nicole] kind of got a shittier deal. It was really, really difficult because we kept having so many new people. Like if you notice, at the beginning of the season, we went from maybe like 6 to 10 to 15 to 18 to 20, and I wanted to encourage everybody to continue to be a part of it, and so, and it's really difficult because we do really deemphasize the slam, and I'm managing it all on my own. It was tough for me. I didn't have that system in place. Cause we've never had this problem. The group has always been much smaller. (interview, June 5, 2014)

Nicole did not advance to the final slam. As Mark said, "We failed [Nicole].

Traditionally in slam culture, you're supposed to give points for how much you participate, and how many times you win that season, and that dictates your place in the draw. And she didn't get that, that padding, that she should have gotten. So that will be different next year" (interview, June 24, 2014).

### *Securing Space for Events*

Another challenge YVR had to deal with was securing space for events. The

group was going to hold a slam in December; however, they had to cancel it because of a scheduling conflict with the library. The city was holding a festival celebrating the arts that weekend. The month prior to this, we were in the large room on the fourth floor, and we had to relocate for another group that needed the space. Mark told the other instructor, “So we just figured out there’s a space downstairs that we’re going to move everybody to right now. They were going to have us share it, but then we’d be loud, and you guys would be trying to instruct. I’m going to just have 4 or 5 people read, and then we’re going to head downstairs” (observation, November 23, 2013). If Mark was upset about having to move, he did not show it.

In addition to problems securing space in the library, sometimes because of events in the surrounding downtown area, it was hard to get to the library. For example, the group’s March event took place the weekend before St. Patrick’s Day, and the city had closed off several streets around the area to make room for a block party. It took several detours and more time than I would have liked to finally arrive at the library parking lot. As I wrote in my field notes that day, “These things (big events) happen downtown, and they affect us” (observation, March 15, 2014).

### *Financial Sustainability*

Probably the biggest challenge that YVR faces is funding. Before Gabriel and I started his interview in June, he discussed this challenge at length. He explained that he has had conversations with arts and culture departments and centers around the state, and some have even sent out representatives to check out YVR’s events. However, these groups are not helping to finance their work. Gabriel said, “Apparently [YVR], the name,

is circulating all throughout the city and all these different arts agencies, but nobody's stepping up to help us fund or manage our program, and I think that needs to stop. They're just getting a free program. At the end of the day, when I'm the only one who doesn't mind donating their services, I'm stretched very thin" (interview, June 5, 2014). He told me that when they go into high schools for their residency program, they do earn some money through programs like Poetry Out Loud, an arts center across town gives them some money for going into high schools, a small private organization pays Mark to go into a particular high school, and a writing program through the university sends them some funds. All together, though, they only bring in about \$30,000 to split among Gabriel, Mark, and another teaching artist. Gabriel commented, "So you spread that among three people, and it's about \$10,000 for an entire year's worth of work. And, I mean, it's a lot of work. I use that for paying myself for going into schools but also to do all of the administrative stuff. It's not a sustainable system right now" (interview, June 5, 2014).

Gabriel talked about their plans to raise money. However, he pointed out that putting on a gala and developing promotional materials for sponsors takes time that he does not really have as a college student. Gabriel talked about his financial goals for YVR:

My goal is to get [YVR] to the point where, when I graduate, that we have enough individual contributions and donations and things like that that I can either pay myself to work full time, you know, a modest salary like \$30,000 a year, or pay myself you know \$15,000 to run [YVR] and then use the other \$15,000 to hire someone to work part-time to kind of handle

the back end stuff. Because at the end of the day, I'm filing taxes, I'm making the flyers, I'm sending in the W9's. You know? So if I didn't have to do that, and if I had someone that I trusted that could do that, and I would pay them \$15,000 a year, that would free up a lot of time to then continue to grow. (interview, June 5, 2014)

He also explained to me that the way the tax system is set up, the group can not afford to be a nonprofit, so they work through a fiscal agent, an agency that takes a small cut of the money for administrative costs. As part of his degree program, Gabriel has taken an arts entrepreneurship class, and he developed a business plan for YVR.

As Gabriel and Mark work on building a financially sustainable organization, they also have to balance funding concerns with their desire to remain autonomous. Mark explained that when he takes money from an organization, he has "to do their programming . . . or at least interpret what they want" (interview, June 24, 2014). Gabriel also commented on his desire to protect the group's autonomy. He said, "Now I'm faced with the reality of developing sustainable business practices and not being co-opted by institutions, you know, and maintaining the integrity of our program. And so there are a lot of challenges that come with it now." He added, "We need money! Help us out!" (interview, June 5, 2014).

Financial sustainability seems to be the greatest challenge that YVR faces, and failing to find a more secure funding stream could eventually lead to the group's downfall. Whether YVR will be a thriving literacy organization in this community in the years to come remains to be seen.

This section provides an overview of the spoken word poetry group, Young Voices Rise, looking at the group's history, attendees, settings, practices, tools, purposes, and challenges. YVR is an example of a "joint enterprise":

An enterprise both engenders and directs social energy. It spurs action as much as it gives it focus. It involves our impulses and emotions as much as it controls them. It invites new ideas as much as it sorts them out. An enterprise is a resource of coordination, of sense-making, of mutual engagement; it is like rhythm to music. (Wenger, 1998, p. 82)

This group offers a structure that young people seem to appreciate.

### **Multiple Possibilities for Engagement**

Young Voices Rise is a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which members write, perform, and hear spoken word poetry. According to Wenger, a community of practice supports "learning as social participation" (1998, p. 4). Learning in YVR occurs through participation in group events. Members learn by doing, and they are surrounded by others who influence them and whom they influence. This section discusses some of the ways YVR operates as a community of practice. Forms of participation, trajectories, connections to the global, and boundaries and brokering are examined.

### **Forms of Participation: "They're great representations of this program in its entirety"**

On their website, Wenger and Trayner (2011) illustrate multiple kinds of participation possible in a community of practice. In particular, they show a core group,



active participants, occasional participants, peripheral participants, and transactional participants. They suggest, “Serving the dynamic mixture of these voices is a key part of the art of cultivating communities and networks” (Wenger & Trayner, 2011, [www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). These categories are useful for understanding participation in YVR.

### *Core Group*

Wenger and Trayner (2011) suggest that the core group is made up of a “relatively small group of people whose passion and engagement energize and nurture the community” ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). Gabriel is the force behind the YVR events that take place on Saturdays at the library, and in this sense, he seems to be the most influential core member. Mark is another core member who helps to drive the vision of YVR, but he is less involved with the group’s out-of-school functions and more involved with its residency program that takes place in schools around town. Gabriel and Mark keep the group going.

### *Active Members*

Moving from the center of the group outwards, the next level of participation consists of the active members. Wenger and Trayner (2011) define this level as “members who are recognized as practitioners and define the community (though they may not be of one mind as to what the community is about)” ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). I would place many of the adolescents enrolled in this study in this level, especially those who show up to most workshops and perform at most slams. Even within this level there

is variation, however. Jasmine and Nicole attended nearly every workshop and performed at nearly every slam. They even traveled with Gabriel across town to attend the workshop and slam at the art gallery in July 2014. Jasmine and Nicole may be the most active members in the group, and Gabriel and Mark are starting to rely on them to take on more responsibilities. Gabriel called them their “go-to poets, not just because they’re good. They are good. But they’re reliable. And they’re hungry. And they’re humble. And they’re great representations of the program in its entirety” (interview, June 5, 2014). In fact, on the day of my interview with Gabriel, he said that Nicole and Jasmine were representing YVR at a gala. Gabriel said he trusted them to do a good job in his place, and the event organizers would be paying the poets for their time.

Jasmine and Nicole distinguished themselves as key active members in other ways as well. They both take a positive leadership role in the group. They cheer for other poets. For example, Nicole can often be heard calling out, “Streetlight’s on, poet,” and they both snap regularly for other performers. I also observed Jasmine mentoring Stacey before a slam, as well as Nicole mentoring an adult teaching artist. Other group members, regardless of their age, trust Nicole and Jasmine because they are accomplished poets who are also approachable and supportive. Gabriel said of the pair, “These kids work harder than me in terms of writing. I really admire their commitment and dedication to their writing. They inspire me” (interview, June 5, 2014). The poets are also being groomed as teaching artists. As Nicole said, “We started teaching and learning how to teach and stuff, and observing [Gabriel and another teaching artist] teaching”; Jasmine added, “We’re teaching, like we’re actually going to be teaching in [YVR] soon, and we’re doing events outside of it, just really getting the community into spoken word

poetry since it's starting to expand" (interview, March 22, 2014). Nicole and Jasmine, under the guidance of the teaching artist Nicole mentioned, were scheduled to teach a night class in the summer at a city center for the arts. The class was cancelled because of low enrollment, but they will try to offer it again in the next session.

Jasmine and Nicole fall into a special category of active members because they have represented YVR in a Brave New Voices (BNV) international poetry slam. Mark talked about how this changes a poet: These kids "have had, you know, four-hour practices. They're BNV kids. The BNV kids, because they go through that training, are on a certain level" (interview, June 24, 2014). Jorge, the adolescent poet in this study who has been in the group the longest, went on the BNV trip twice. Once an active member, he started to cycle out of YVR during the 2013-2014 season. He was becoming more engaged with college life.

I would also place Rafael and Shawna in the category of active members. However, they participate to a lesser degree than Jasmine and Nicole. They do attend most workshops and slams, but they are not asked to present on behalf of YVR and they have not been to Brave New Voices. They both became active in YVR during the 2013-2014 season. Mark said of Rafael, "He's just behind [Nicole and Jasmine] as a writer. He has had far less practice" (interview, June 24, 2014). Nicole said of Shawna, "She hasn't really been a part of [YVR] that long" (interview, July 21, 2014). At the beginning of the 2013-2014 season, Shawna was 19 and Rafael was 18 and a senior in high school. Because of their ages, it is unlikely they will ever become "BNV kids" and move into more central forms of participation within YVR. Rafael admitted this: "I see that if I was dedicated earlier on, I would be at a whole new level than I am right now, which I kind of

regret, but at the same time, everything happens for a reason. I guess I wasn't mature enough to do this, and I feel like I am now" (interview, March 19, 2014).

### *Occasional Participants*

Wenger and Trayner (2011) describe the next level out as occasional participants, or those who "participate when the topic is of special interest [or] they have [something] specific to contribute" ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). During the 2013-2014 season, Jorge fell into this category. He only attended a few times. Also, Stacey, the youngest of the poets enrolled in this study, participated only occasionally. She attended one workshop during the 2013-2014 season, the first one she had ever been to, and she performed at slams only occasionally. I did notice that Stacey was the only participant in this study to be present at the entire first workshop of the next season; perhaps this signals a shift in her level of participation for the year to come.

The adult teaching artists in YVR could also be considered occasional participants, at least in terms of their participation in the group on Saturdays at the public library. While they have very active roles in the high schools where they oversee poetry clubs, at the Saturday functions, their presence was unpredictable. When they did show up to functions, they would participate as writers in the writing workshop. At slams, they sometimes performed as sacrificial poets or served as deejays or judges. In one instance, a teaching artist co-taught a Saturday writing workshop with a professor from out of town.

### *Peripheral Participants*

The next level out represents peripheral participation. Wenger and Trayner (2011) describe this level as those “with less engagement and authority, either because they are still newcomers or because they do not have as much personal commitment to the practice” ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). Every time YVR meets, new people attend. Sometimes they are people who just happened to be in the library that day, they are friends of members, or they are part of another community youth group. These members are on the periphery. They are welcome to participate in workshops and slams. They sometimes return and eventually move into more central forms of participation, attending occasionally or one day becoming active members. Alternatively, they might not come back at all. What is interesting is that newcomers can enter YVR and fully participate in group activities, what Lave and Wenger (1991) term “legitimate peripheral participation.” When there are many peripheral participants, it changes the nature of the slams. For example, the audience at the art museum event in July used less snapping, probably because of the number of people new to YVR that day.

### *Transactional Participants*

Finally, Wenger and Trayner (2011) place transactional participants on the outermost ring of participation. These are “outsiders who interact with the community occasionally without being members themselves, to receive or provide a service” ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). Transactional participants tended to be guest poets visiting the space to perform or teach; university partners coming to offer advice or funding; or parents, other family members, teachers, or community members who simply wanted to show support for this community. As a researcher, I saw myself as a transactional

participant. Although transactional participants are the farthest out from the core group, it does not mean that they are unimportant to YVR. The group's connection with a local university puts adolescents in touch with higher education. A university organization has financed some of the group's Brave New Voices travel as well.

At events, these different forms of participation are valued, all the way from Gabriel running the day-to-day operations of the group to the casual passerby who drops into a slam to sit in the back and listen. As Wenger and Trayner (2011) write, “[A] red flag is when there is no movement across levels, no one from the periphery moving in, the same old core group, or no new blood among active members” ([www.wenger-trayner.com](http://www.wenger-trayner.com)). YVR seems to thrive because of the different possibilities available for participation.

### **Trajectories: “A fire struck inside of me”**

Wenger (1998) uses the term trajectory to mean “a continuous motion—one that has a momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences,” and he emphasizes that a trajectory does not “imply a fixed course or a fixed destination” (p. 154). Wenger outlines several different kinds of trajectories, including peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary, and outbound trajectories. I found that the adolescent participants in the current study were involved in three different kinds of trajectories: inbound, insider, and outbound trajectories. Looking more closely at these trajectories can shed light on how participants move within YVR.

#### *Inbound Trajectories*

Regarding inbound trajectories, Wenger (1998) writes, “Newcomers are joining the community with the prospect of becoming full participants in its practice. Their identities are invested in their future participation, even though their present participation may be peripheral” (p. 154). When I asked the adolescent writers to reflect on how they ended up at YVR events, most of them talked about joining school poetry clubs first. Usually this involved being dragged to the club by a friend. Jasmine said:

I got into it basically last year through a friend because I would write some things and she would be like, “Hey, that’s a good idea for a poem. Maybe you’d like to help me do a poem.” And I was like, “I don’t really do poetry, but sure I’ll give it a go,” and it just started working from there because she was like, “I think you should share your poem. It’s really good.” And that was the time that [Gabriel] came with, I think, two guest speakers. I’m not sure who they were because I was new, but they came with two guest speakers, and they were like, “You have to slam this poem at our festival that’s coming up.” I was shocked. I was like, “Oh, I don’t do poetry. I’m not used to this.” And it just started off from there. They started working with me. They were like, “You should do this type of poem or more types of poems,” and as I kept progressing I was like, “Oh, I can write poems now out of anywhere.” (interview, December 26, 2013)

For Jasmine, it was a friend who encouraged her to attend a poetry club meeting, but it was the connections she made with the teaching artists that validated her writing and motivated her to continue to attend.

Jorge also had a friend tell him about poetry club:

I had just moved to the school, and I didn't know anybody. I knew I liked to rap. It was a big thing for me because like one of my friends introduced me to rapping. I was alone, and then my friend, the president of the poetry club, he heard me, and he was like, "Hey, dude. You're actually kind of good, you know. I rap a little bit too." And he was like, "If you want to improve, come to the poetry club and improve your writing, and learn more about rhythm and this and that," and I was like, "Hmm, well, all right." And that's when it all began, the two weeks of pestering me. I only went because one of my friends was like very persistent about me going, and he kept asking me and telling me like, "Dude. It's really cool." At first I was really hesitant to go because I wasn't, I've never been exposed to spoken word, and I thought it was, you know, like what you see in like the Shakespeare stuff. And I wasn't into English class . . . , and so I was like, "Why would I want to go to something that didn't really capture my interest in class?" I mean, why would I want to stay there after school? And after like two weeks of pestering me, I finally went, and I really liked it. It was just really different. When I first started going to poetry, we watched this video of a poet. His name was B. Yung. And this dude, he's from New York, and I remember I used to like analyzing lyrics, and so when I heard him, it's like, I didn't understand anything he said. So I didn't understand anything, and that's when I really started to question myself, as to like, all right. "So you like to analyze lyrics, but you can't understand what this dude is saying in this poem?" And that's when I



started, like a fire struck inside of me, and it was like, “You gotta learn. You gotta understand what this dude is saying because it sounds cool, especially the amount of intensity he’s adding to it. And the way he, like he wrote that! Like he actually wrote that stuff, like really? And if I’m capable of writing at that level . . . I have to be able to learn to write that way because I want to be that smart. (interview, December 22, 2013)

Like Jasmine, Jorge went along to a poetry club because of a friend’s insistence on the matter. Once there, it was connecting to an expert—in this case, through a recorded poetry performance—that motivated him to continue to attend. He wanted to be able to write like this new role model.

For these poets, friends immersed them into their school poetry clubs, reinforcing the idea that students’ social lives can also influence their literate lives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). In other cases, it was a teacher or librarian who introduced the student to the group, someone acting as a literacy sponsor (Brandt, 2001). For example, Stacey met Mark when he did a poetry workshop at her middle school. After that, the school librarian took some of the kids to a YVR event at the public library. Stacey explained:

[Mark] visited our school and he told us to write a poem for a little while. And then once we were done, he told us to read it out loud to everyone. I was like really scared. I was like very quiet. I never talked to a lot of people, and making friends was hard, but I did make them. After a while, I volunteered to say my poem out loud. I was very scared, but I did it. Our librarian invited some people to go with her to the [public library where YVR holds its events]. I thought it was just to hear people say poetry, and

then . . . they told me, “You should say one of your poems.” I was like, “I don’t know how many people are going to be there.” And then I signed up, and I was expecting like two people, and I see this whole crowd. I was going to die. And then I went up there. My hands were shaking. My voice was cracking. But then I started reading out my poem. (interview, January 18, 2014)

The librarian at Stacey’s school played an important role in getting her involved with spoken word poetry. She also introduced Stacey to Mark, who has been a motivating force in Stacey’s writing life. It sounds as if performing also offered Stacey a thrill that encouraged future participation in the group.

Nicole was drawn into the school poetry club through her English teacher:

So [my English teacher] started poetry club and stuff and so she’d tell the class, “Hey, if you guys like poetry and you want to come learn how to do this, how to write and stuff, come check it out.” So one day I was just bored. I didn’t really start going to poetry club a lot until probably halfway through my freshman year. There were like a couple of people in there, and they just started doing workshops, and [a second teacher], who was the co-sponsor of poetry club, would teach and stuff, and [my English teacher] would teach, and so I just started going. And I just started writing poems and stuff, and then she started talking about [YVR] and talking about these poetry slams at the library. And so I already had started coming here [to the library] a lot because I did volunteering over the summer quite a bit, and so . . . [my English teacher] told me about these

slams and I was like, “All right. I’ll go.” So I went once, and I was like, “This is kind of cool.” And I heard [Gabriel] and them, and that was when I first met everyone in [YVR]. So I just started going to the slams regularly, and then I started doing more poetry and stuff. And then they started talking about spoken word during poetry club. I started doing Poetry Out Loud, which is the recitation competition. I started preparing for that. And then after we have Poetry Out Loud at school, we have our end-of-the-year slam. And so I wrote my first poem, my first slam poem. It was my pancake poem. And [Gabriel] came and hosted. It was either [Gabriel] or [Mark]. So that’s pretty much how I started like finding out about [YVR]. So I just started coming on Saturdays. I started writing more. I started getting up on the microphone. And then it just like progressed. And then sophomore year, [YVR] actually came in and started working with us at [school], so that’s the main reason I really got involved. It was pretty cool. It was interesting. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Nicole’s English teacher played an important role in encouraging her to attend poetry club meetings at the school. This teacher also encouraged her to get involved with YVR at Saturday events at the library. Now there is a YVR teaching artist assigned to Nicole’s school.

Rafael was also drawn into his school’s poetry club with the help of a teacher. In fact, Rafael and Nicole attend the same school, and it was the same English teacher who encouraged them both. However, Rafael arrived at the club via a different path:

I failed out of mainstream English my freshman year, so I had to take summer school . . . and we went over a poetry unit. [The teacher] read some of my stuff and she actually told me about the program. I kind of shrugged her off. And then after summer school I was placed into honors, and from there I've been in honors ever since, which is kind of a funny story since I flunked out of mainstream. Freshman year I kind of shrugged it off, I'm like, "Nah," and then sophomore year I dated a girl, [Nicole], in poetry club, and she invited me to one of the meetings. And I liked it but I [thought], "This really isn't for me" because I would write stuff and then I would hear other people like [Jasmine] and [Nicole] and I would just be like, "No, I can't do that. That's way out of my league." And junior year, I reconnected with [Nicole] and she invited me back. (interview, March 19, 2014)

In the accounts by Jasmine, Jorge, and Nicole, once at the club meeting, it was connections with experts that inspired and motivated them to write. For Rafael, however, comparing himself to others in the group intimidated him. These encounters discouraged him, and he gave up for a while.

Shawna's path was more circuitous than the others' paths. She said:

I met [Mark] when I was 16. I was doing another thing for [an arts organization for homeless and abused kids]. I spoke at their luncheon. And we did these paintings, and then we wrote these poems called I Was, I Am, I Will Be. And we did it in like different sections. And um, he and the program's director at the time, they picked ones that they wanted to read at

the luncheon, and they picked me . . . for I Will Be. And I was like, “I didn’t write anything for that.” And they were like, “Well, you have to.” So I wrote it. We put it all together, and I read the I Will Be at the luncheon, and everybody loved it. [Later] I did a summer camp through [the arts organization]. I [saw Mark] there because he teaches a spoken word poetry class. And at the end of the week, he had given me a card and was like, “You should come to the library because we do these poetry slams.” And I was like, “Poetry slams? I don’t know what the hell that is.” So I was like, “Okay, cool.” So I convinced my house a couple times to go down there and go to watch. Sometimes I read. Sometimes I didn’t because I felt very anti-care because a lot of the kids that I see now were reading back then and they were still like really good at what they do. I stopped going for a while. My house didn’t want to go anymore.

(interview, December 27, 2013)

Like Rafael, Shawna was discouraged when she encountered fellow poets with more expertise than her. In both of these cases, participants mentioned feeling intimidated by peers who were more accomplished.

When Shawna co-taught arts camps with Mark and Gabriel, they encouraged her to come down to the library to slam. Shawna recalled her conversation with Gabriel:

He was like, “You need to come down to the library.” And I was like, “All right. When does it start? Give me a date.” So he was like, “It’s every second and fourth Saturday, and I was like, “All right, cool.” I still didn’t go. I had a lot of stuff going on. I was moving around a lot, so it was hard

to get down here, especially because I didn't live down here in this area. I lived in [a city to the east]. I live over here in this area now, but, when I was still living [to the east], they had um the showcase thing [YVR] did before their competition in Chicago, and I came with some friends to see it. And that's where I met [Jasmine] and [Nicole] and all those. Like I walked in and watched it, and I was like, "Whoa. I want to do this so bad." And I was like, "They are so good at it. I want to do it." I was like, "Oh, god. I've got to." So after that I messaged [Gabriel] on Facebook, and I was like, "When is the next slam?" And he was like, "It's on blahdity blah day and at such a time," but he was like, "We won't have none for a while because we have the competition in Chicago," so I was a little bit bummed. And then I was like, "All right, all right. I got it." Um, when I finally moved out this way, I was like, "The library's right there! I can go whenever I want," so I went down when they started having them run back up again and went and it was cool. I slammed, I placed fourth, and I was like, "That's awesome." I walked in, and [Gabriel] was like, "I am really happy to see you here." And I was like, "I'm really happy to be here." So yeah. It was cool. (interview, December 27, 2013)

As with Stacey, Shawna felt validated by the audience. In addition, the group leaders were important sponsors for her. Gabriel, in particular, voiced his pleasure at seeing her in attendance.

As these poets' stories demonstrate, an inbound trajectory can be smooth, quick, and direct (as in the case of Jasmine) or it can zigzag into and out of the group over many

years (as in the case of Shawna). A friend, teacher, or librarian might help spur the person toward participation, and organizations like high school poetry clubs or other youth organizations can be instrumental as well. Some of these poets talked about being inspired by others. When Jorge encountered a poem he did not understand, he was motivated to learn enough to figure it out. Rafael heard Nicole and Jasmine and thought that he could not write as well as them. While Shawna mentioned feeling discouraged by the expertise of peer poets at first, hearing these same writers later actually motivated her to write and perform.

All of these poets said something about sharing their work, and it is probably no surprise performance would be an important catalyst for setting inbound trajectories in motion. Hull and Katz (2006) have highlighted “the power of public performance in generating especially intense moments of self-enactment” (p. 47). Early validation of the poets’ work seems to have motivated them to continue toward more central forms of participation.

### *Insider Trajectories*

As Wenger (1998) writes, “The formation of an identity does not end with full membership. The evolution of the practice continues—new events, new demands, new inventions, and new generations all create occasions for renegotiating one’s identity” (p. 154). As YVR evolves, members’ roles within it change as well.

Jasmine and Nicole seem to be on insider trajectories. YVR needs more teaching artists to go out into school clubs, and these two poets are being trained for that work. They are poised to teach at a local center for the arts. Also, as Mark and Gabriel get

busier with the demands of their growing organization, they are calling on Nicole and Jasmine to perform in their place. They have named them “ambassador poets,” a move that secures their spots on next year’s Brave New Voices team. As the organization changes and expands, these two adolescent poets who are central to the group are participating in new ways, and as their roles in the group change, so do their identities. Nicole talked about some of the tensions involved:

**Nicole:** It’s just been, this past year with [YVR] has been really weird and different and interesting. I’m in a different position like from respect and just as a, just with my credentials, as a poet compared to everyone now. It’s like a brand new year in [YVR] because I’m in a different position from where I was at last year, so it’s really weird. Probably every event I’ve been to with [YVR] has changed a lot and has impacted me. But those, just this recent year, has been a lot. I’ve been thinking about that a lot.

**Wendy:** So where do you think you are now in the group?

**Nicole:** I don’t know.

**Wendy:** You’re not a beginner. Would you call yourself intermediate or advanced?

**Nicole:** [Mark] always says that like, to be a master of something, you have to have 10,000 hours of experience in it. You have to put 10,000 hours, and I definitely have not put 10,000 hours into this. I feel like I’m not, I know I’m not really a beginner, and maybe between intermediate and like almost advanced. But I don’t know. It’s weird. I feel kind of like,



really defined with my skills and stuff, and just in [YVR], but it's just weird. I feel like a lot of younger middle school poets, like they look up to me and stuff. So it's just kind of, I don't know. It's kind of weird because [Mark] and [Gabriel] kind of treat us like the same. He kind of treats me the same from when I was like a sophomore in [YVR], so it's just weird. And that's kind of like an unsure thing. I'm like where am I in [YVR]? Who am I? Do they really consider me as super professional? Or do they consider me just another youth poet? So I'm not really sure actually. It's kind of like on the fence of all these different like statuses, but I don't know. I don't think it's that important.

**Wendy:** It's neat that you feel you have moved into a different phase.

**Nicole:** Yeah. It's definitely like another phase. It's interesting. It's kind of weird to see. Right now I've been in a phase that's kind of awkward, and I'm not really sure what's happening. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Moje writes, "Identities are always situated in relationships" (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 231). Nicole and Jasmine both mentioned feeling tension between their new identities and the teaching artists' slowness at recognizing their growth. They worry that Mark and Gabriel will always see them as kids. They expressed frustration that Gabriel was telling them how to teach and how to be ambassadors as they drove to the art museum event in July; long before this, teachers at Jasmine and Nicole's school trusted them to teach spoken word poetry for entire classes of their peers. It is understandable that they would want respect, space, and freedom. At the same time, these poets are clearly valued and respected by Gabriel and Mark. I saw it every time they performed, and the teaching

artists always spoke of them with admiration. Nicole and Jasmine are unaware of their prized status. Weinstein and West (2012) have found that problems can arise in youth spoken word poetry groups when a higher status is given to some members of the group. However, it is interesting that Jasmine and Nicole are definite favorites, yet they still seek a higher status in the group. Wenger writes, “It is not easy to become a radically new person in the same community of practice” (1998, p. 89). Nicole and Jasmine demonstrate that being on an insider trajectory can be complicated.

### *Outbound Trajectories*

Looking at members’ outbound trajectories can also shed light on how participation works in YVR. Wenger writes, “Some trajectories lead out of a community, as when children grow up. What matters then is how a form of participation enables what comes next” (1998, p. 155). YVR is for adolescents, so how do things change when poets go off to college or become too old for the Brave New Voices (BNV) competition? Poets up to age 19 can compete in BNV, but Gabriel said he prefers not to take poets that old because it is unfair for younger competitors. So what happens to these poets? Where do they go?

When I recruited Jorge to the study, I thought he would be a regular at group events. However, throughout the 2013-2014 season, I probably saw him more often in interviews than I saw him at workshops and slams. A college student living across town without a car, he had a hard time making it to events at the library. As school demanded more throughout the year, we saw him less often. I asked him what happens as YVR poets go off to college. Jorge said:

It's extremely difficult to balance work, school, [and] studying. You have to shoulder all these new responsibilities being in college and it's just so difficult to manage it. Like any other person in the world, you do get to feeling lonely. You start to feel that sense of like, "Who am I really?" or "What am I really capable of?" And that's exactly when poetry comes into play. All the skills and everything you learned in [YVR]. That's when all those skills, all that training, all those things you developed through the organization, that's when all that really comes out and helps you out. Like for me, I tried a few times this past year, when I was at [the university], I had a difficult time really connecting with a lot of the people because I noticed that I'm thinking about stuff that these kids are not going to think about for the next three or four years, which is social issues, social activism, and I'm really thinking about how am I going to combat [these issues], whereas a lot of these kids, the incoming freshmen that I've met, they were more concerned with, "Hey, how are we going to get to this party? How about that party?" And you know, as great as that sounds, it's like, my mindset has matured [beyond theirs] because of [YVR]. . . . I've written about three or four poems. I haven't finished any of them because I just can't find the time to do it. When I'm in my room, I would just sit alone, and just think to myself, "Oh, that's a great poem to start." I'd start that one, and then I'd have to go to [the school where I was a teaching artist] and say, "Oh, I'll kind of leave that. I'll save that document, go back to it maybe a few months later. God dang, I can add this. You know,

you're still a writer. Maybe you are not writing as much." For me, personally, it's a hobby. I don't intend to make a career out of it. You know, that's not a goal. It's just an outlet. It's a hobby. It's my friend. It's not like something I'm getting married to, but it's definitely something I'd like to stay related to, or in contact with, because it is a part of my identity, and it did help me out when I was younger. And you know, it doesn't feel right to not have the opportunity to write, for me, you know. Even though it's extremely difficult, and it's time consuming, I still need to do it. I always try to make time for it. And um, as difficult as it is, I still try to do it as much as possible. (interview, June 27, 2014)

Jorge has worked as a teaching artist in a high school poetry club, a new role for him. He is also considering starting a poetry club at his university, but he is having trouble finding the time for it. Regarding his role in YVR, Jorge now sees himself as a "consistent supporter" (interview, July 11, 2014). Poets who grew up in YVR and have gone off to college seem to be welcomed back with open arms when they do return. They might deliver a poem at the beginning or end of a slam, but they do not directly compete anymore with the adolescent poets in YVR. Their roles have changed in the group.

Near the end of the 2013-2014 season, another poet, Rafael, was getting ready to graduate from high school and begin his outbound trajectory from YVR. He anticipated the upcoming changes and had begun attending an adult open microphone event with Nicole and Jasmine. Rafael said, "Now that I'm 18, I'm not going to have a lot of time left to do this [YVR] stuff. They concentrate on the youth. So once I get too old I'm going to have to start looking for a new place" (interview, March 19, 2014). He talked

about how he hoped to become a teaching artist for YVR someday.

Gabriel acknowledged this aging-out phenomenon. He said, “They can come back and perform, work as a teaching artist, [or] start [their] own club” (interview, June 5, 2014). Ideally he would like to employ the best ones as teaching artists, which may happen when the group has more money. Gabriel said, “The kids who come up in our program, who graduate, grow up and go off to college, who have been raised in our culture, those are our next teaching artists. The hard part is we don’t have funding to be able to pay them yet” (interview, June 5, 2014).

As Wenger (1998) writes about trajectories, “In the end, it is members—by their very participation—who create the set of possibilities to which newcomers are exposed as they negotiate their own trajectories”; in addition, “a community of practice is a field of possible trajectories and thus the proposal of an identity” (p. 156). The examples above show various paths and possibilities into and out of YVR. They also show how active members’ trajectories change over time as the group evolves.

### **Connections to the Global: “It gets really intense”**

This community of practice has connections to a larger, global community of practitioners, especially through the Brave New Voices (BNV) competition each year. Wenger (1998) writes, “The local and the global are not different historical moments in an expanding world. Instead, they are related levels of participation that always coexist and shape each other” (p. 131). Additionally, “negotiation of meaning, learning, the development of practices, and the formation of identities and social configurations—[involve] complex interactions between the local and the global” (1998, p. 133).

The influence of Brave New Voices on YVR is significant. Throughout YVR's 2013-2014 season, competing at this international poetry slam was mentioned again and again. And as Mark said, the kids who go on these trips come back changed. They gain connections and friends around the country, as well as new perspectives and ideas about what is possible to accomplish through spoken word. Mark pointed out that the BNV kids undergo more rigorous training than those who stay behind.

Announcements throughout the season marked the importance of the BNV trip. An online post from October 11, 2013 stated, "Yo! Tomorrow will be the 1<sup>st</sup> SLAM of our 2013-2014 season and will mark the first day of our Brave New Voices journey to Philly" (online post, retrieved November 6, 2013). One day later, a follow-up post announced: "Today is the day! 1<sup>st</sup> Slam of the season! Those of you who are interested in trying to make the BNV team heading to Philly this summer, come get your practice on! Oh, and have some fun of course!" (online post, retrieved November 6, 2013).

During the Town Slam, Jasmine and Nicole did a poem together. Afterward, Mark explained to the audience that the pair competed in the BNV competition in Chicago, and that all of them had a chance to make the next team if they came out to library events and competed. He pointed out that the BNV stages they competed on were like the one at this event (i.e., in an auditorium). Mark told the crowd that people from all over the world competed in BNV competitions.

In January, Gabriel explained to the slam audience that taking a team to BNV is expensive, about \$15,000 for the whole team. As the season continued, they started to impose rules on the slam that would also be used at BNV. Specifically, poems could not be longer than three minutes. He provided other advice as well, "So you need to work at

your craft. You need to start memorizing your poems. You need to have at least three poems that you feel are ready. Study. Go on YouTube. Study other BNV poets. Get other concepts” (observation, February 15, 2014).

Later in the season, the stakes increased as the preliminary slam and final slam-off neared. Gabriel explained the situation in an online post:

This Slam will be the 1st of two Slam Off's that will narrow down from the top 20 to the top 10 poets who will be competing for [their] chance to make this year's Brave New Voices Team. The Final Slam off will be held on May 3rd. Poet sign up will begin at 1:00 pm and will close promptly at 1:45 pm. Only the first 20 poets will be entered into the competition. Slam will begin at 2 pm and will only be one round. The top 10 poets will move on to the final slam off on May 3rd. (online post, retrieved May 23, 2014)

The final slam-off was eventually rescheduled for May 10, and poets were told to show up early. Only 20 would be allowed to compete, and if they showed up after 1:45 p.m., they would not be added to the list. Gabriel adhered to this policy even when Shawna showed up late. She was barred from the competition, and she was heartbroken. At this preliminary slam, Nicole drew the first spot and did not advance to the final slam. Jasmine ended up winning the final slam. No other poets in this study placed at that event.

As it turned out, YVR did not end up sending anybody to the BNV competition in the summer of 2014. It was not until my June interview with Gabriel that I heard YVR would not be sending a team to BNV. Gabriel explained the reasons:

Unfortunately, a lot of the funding that we were expecting to have didn't

come through. [The humanities group at a local university was] able to fund a little bit, but not necessarily as much as we anticipated. I actually am booked. Youth Speaks . . . didn't send out the date until like a couple of months ago, and I had already booked a camp. I mean, I've gotta pay bills, so, you know, I had to book a camp. So I wasn't going to be able to go. Then our fiscal agent [and] board members weren't comfortable with me not going and us not having insurance. They were like, "If you are going to send another staff member and it's not you, we're already risking not having insurance, you know, going out of town with a bunch of kids." It's kind of risky because they're ultimately held liable. So we looked into insurance. It was about \$1,500 for the trip, and so you add that onto an already extraordinarily expensive trip. It was probably going to be about a \$10,000 trip. Last year, it was, it's a little less expensive when it's on the west coast or somewhere relatively closer because airfare is a big part too. It works out, though, because it allows us to really look at where we are, what we did, what we're doing well, what we need to work on as an entire organization. And those are things that you need to do to grow. So not going this year sucks, but I think it's good for us to be able to grow and prepare for the future because there is so much more that we do than BNV. (interview, June 5, 2014)

The hype all season long about going to BNV was for nothing, it seems.

At the art museum event in July, Gabriel announced that four poets in the group had become "YVR ambassadors." He and Mark had decided that three of the top scorers



in the slam-off (i.e., Jasmine and two other poets) plus Nicole would be representing YVR at next year's BNV competition. These ambassadors were given special roles at the July event. They shared poems at various points along our gallery tour. During the workshop, he placed them in different corners of the room to lead groups in their writing.

Nicole said it was too bad I did not get to see a team prepare for the BNV trip:

It's kind of a big deal because as long as I've been a part of [YVR], the team has gone almost every year. One of the first slams that I went to was a BNV slam off. You see another side of like [Gabriel] and stuff because like he's coaching us. I feel like it's an awesome experience too. It's a cool thing to see happen, and with the BNV practice, we're meeting twice a week, almost every day, and we're trying to get all the stuff done in a matter of like a couple of weeks, like the two weeks before BNV. We're in crunch time. It's like we're meeting every day. And a couple of days before, we are meeting every single day until BNV. It gets really intense. And the practices that happen are really cool. We're writing group pieces especially for BNV. BNV just brings in a lot of things that aren't always there in the normal slam that we have. It's sad we didn't get to go.

Yesterday would have been the last day too of Brave New Voices. And a friend of mine from Canada that I met there was messaging me all week, and he was like, "[Nicole], I wish you were here, dude. Ugh." And we were talking about it, and we're like, "Next year, yeah, next year." And I was like, "Yeah, hopefully" It's great. It's a different experience. It's interesting. Plus there are so many amazing poets. Hopefully next year,

because I'm pretty sure we're going to go next year, so if we do, you should definitely try to go if you're still involved. I met people from Guam, Bermuda, Canada, England, Leeds England, like everywhere, Alaska. The team from Alaska was so awesome. Like New Mexico kills it. It's crazy to see all the different communities of people. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Nicole talked about how her participation changed as she was preparing for BNV. She also met people from all over the world at the event.

Even though YVR did not end up sending a team to the 2014 BNV competition, the influence of BNV is still important at the local level. For example, adolescent and adult poets sometimes wear BNV shirts to events. I also observed a practice that Gabriel said came from BNV. At two different slams, a poet read a piece that was upsetting. The host had the audience stand and extend an arm toward the poet in support of that person. Gabriel explained that they had picked up this practice from BNV, and he walked the audience through the practice:

So I want you guys to just put your hands up for one second, take a deep breath in, deep breath out. And on this next deep breath I want you to just transmit all the love and positive energy that you've got and put it out there. [Silence.] And there you go. It's bigger than hip hop. This is love, this is community, and I'm so thankful that I have the honor of doing this. (observation, July 19, 2014).

While YVR seems to function as an independent, local literacy organization, its connections to the global community of spoken word poets, especially Brave New

Voices, influence its local practices. These connections focus practice at the local level, and they help youth members understand where they fit in the larger spoken word poetry community. Both global and local connections affect members' participation in spoken word poetry.

### **Boundaries and Brokering: “Different perspectives”**

A community of practice has boundaries and peripheries, or limits and possibilities. Wenger (1998) writes, “Joining a community of practice involves entering not only its internal configuration but also its relations with the rest of the world” (p. 103). Going along with this idea is the notion of brokering, “a common feature of the relation of a community of practice with the outside”; “brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and—if they are good brokers—open new possibilities for meaning” (1998, p. 109).

Gabriel engages in brokering often, crossing boundaries and opening peripheries. He is constantly reaching out to bring other groups in or to send YVR members out in various ways. When YVR was up for a community award, Gabriel encouraged members to go to that organization's website and vote. He also sends poets out to community events to perform. Throughout the season, Gabriel scheduled events in conjunction with other organizations, including the library, groups from a local university, the art museum across town, a religious center, a city center for the arts near the library, and a city center for the arts across town. Gabriel and Mark also work in a dozen local schools and offer workshops and camps in conjunction with an arts group for abused and homeless children.

Gabriel constantly invites people into the group. Sometimes these are guest teaching artists from out of state. Sometimes they are poets from adult open mics around town, or they might be professors or experts on the college application process. Gabriel told YVR members why they bring guest teaching artists into YVR: “Not to say that [Mark] and I are not, you know, good at workshops, but we want to give you guys different perspectives. There’s tons of people in that community. So we’re working really hard to get these people here, so take advantage of that opportunity” (observation, January 18, 2014). He also commented that “this is the next phase of our program, having these types of artists come in and do what they do best” (observation, January 18, 2014). Gabriel is good at brokering connections with the outside world, and this practice seems to benefit members of YVR.

This section explores possibilities for engagement in YVR, focusing on forms of participation, trajectories, connections to the global, and boundaries and brokering. I do not wish to give the impression that any of these are fixed, however. Communities change over time, especially as people enter and exit. Wenger writes, “Relative newcomers become relative old-timers. Last year’s trainee now helps the new trainee”; “participants forge new identities from their new perspectives . . . [and] the past, the present, and the future live together” (1998, p. 90). Possibilities for participation change.

### **A Safe Space for Storytelling**

One of the most inspiring aspects of YVR is how it fosters a safe space for learning. This section describes how YVR maintains a safe space, using “safe space”

language, building community, upholding ground rules, and offering support and encouragement.

**“Safe Space” Language: “You feel like you have no worries in the world”**

According to a query using the data analysis program NVivo, the term “safe space” (including close variations) appears 35 times in the data. (See Appendix B for a safe space “word tree,” which shows the eight words before and after each use of the term.)

In an online post on October 24, 2013, Gabriel wrote, “[YVR] is not only focused on creating safe spaces for young people to find their voices but also in creating opportunities for our students to learn how to navigate our world” (Retrieved 6 November 2013). The term “safe space” shows up in the group’s mission statement, and the adolescent members of the group sometimes use the term as well. I asked participants to comment on the idea:

**Wendy:** Talk to me about a safe space and how [YVR] accomplishes that.

**Nicole:** I’m not really sure. I think it’s just the poets themselves, like the people that actually run everything. They just have good energy, and they just bring people together. They make it clear that like the space that we are usually in, that the rules are to be brave, to be respectful, and your voice matters, and stuff. They make it clear this is a place where disrespect isn’t going to be tolerated and so I think, it’s kind of hard. I’m not really sure how they establish the exact safe space.

**Jasmine:** It’s just the atmosphere.

**Rafael:** Yeah, and you feel safe here. You feel like you can express yourself in a way that you won't be judged. (interview, March 22, 2014)

Jorge said that the YVR space is “free of judgments” and group leaders “try to create as much positive energy as they can in the space. And you will feel it. You will feel happy. You just feel free. You feel like you have no worries in the world” (interview, June 27, 2014). Stacey also mentioned freedom from judgment. She said, “To me, [YVR] is like an opportunity for people to express themselves without being judged for what they write, without worrying” (interview, March 22, 2014).

Gabriel believes that if YVR creates the right conditions for learning—and much of this involves supporting a safe space—young people will want to learn and grow.

Gabriel said:

What school is really good at is telling you and forcing you to be a better academic. You gotta read. You gotta write. Blah blah blah blah blah. We're not trying to make you a great writer. We're not trying to make you a great poet. What we're doing is creating a space where you feel safe enough to make yourself a great writer and a great poet. At the end of the day, we're not training you as writers, and we're not training you as performers per say. Yeah, we'll give you little techniques in the workshops and little things like that, but we're not drilling you, you know. What we're doing is creating a space where you feel safe enough to push yourself to be empowered, to empower yourself. That's what's really important, I feel like. We're not training anybody. We're creating a space for empowerment to happen, because once again, in my personal

experience, nobody made me a better speaker, a better writer, a better poet. The space that was created allowed me to develop those skills or the desires to develop those skills on my own. And now, nobody can take them away from me because I own them, because I got them myself, you know, with the help of people, but I made the decision, you know. And that's the thing. When you turn homework in because you have to and you turn homework in because you want to, the want to is always going to be better homework because you wanted to. So we create the space for them to want to grow. (interview, June 5, 2014)

According to Gabriel, when provided with the right conditions, young people will push themselves as writers and flourish. It seems that the risk of performing at a YVR slam is balanced with the love and support these performers feel from the crowd. This safe space contributes to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that allows young people to thrive as writers in YVR.

### **Sense of Community: “Other people are listening”**

A query through NVivo showed that the term “community” (including close variations) appears 188 times in the data. For example, Gabriel often refers to the group as a “beautiful community,” as he wrote on April 20, 2014 (online post, retrieved May 23, 2014). The adolescent poets also use this term. Jasmine said, “I mean, if you don't have the community, maybe you wouldn't really have a reason to write. If you don't have a sense that other people are listening, you wouldn't be motivated to keep writing” (interview, December 26, 2013).

Participants talked about community:

**Rafael:** It's such a close-knit community that . . . it feels like you've been around for a while even though it's been like seven months or so.

**Nicole:** Everybody feels like super welcome.

**Rafael:** You just kind of walk in, and you get absorbed into the culture.

**Nicole:** [YVR is] a giant family. (interview, March 22, 2014)

Stacey also talked about belonging. She said, "I'm finally a part of something that I fit in. Because I don't really fit in anywhere at my school, so I thought right here was really fun. I felt like I was in a family" (interview, March 22, 2014).

Storytelling contributes to community building. At the art museum event in July, where many of the participants were new to YVR, Gabriel said:

What we're doing here is bigger than Hip Hop. It's bigger than poetry. We are sharing our stories. We are sharing our community. We are meeting new people. I bet there are at least five things in that last poem that you guys had no idea that's who I am. And now you know. And now we're closer because of that. And that's the beautiful thing about sharing our stories together in a community. And that's why I love doing what I'm doing. (observation, July 19, 2014)

Gabriel suggests that the community is shaped by members' stories. Through the process of opening up, becoming vulnerable, and sharing stories, group members build trust and community.

In the YVR community, there is an expectation that people care about each other. Also, there is an expectation that they will transfer what they learn in YVR to other



communities. Mark said at the Town Slam:

All of you, realize that this little thing right here in the audience, this is a family unit. [The crowd cheers.] And having said that I want you guys to really want and value this, but also, you go into your communities and you go back to live your lives, and remember to make good decisions. You guys, this generation, the young people in this room, are the most at risk of anybody out there. So please take care of each other. Make smart decisions because stuff happens, man, and it's not a joke. (observation, November 8, 2013)

Jorge said he believes YVR events do not just build a community of poets, but the group is changing the surrounding community as well. He said, "I think creating those types of events, making it more common in our society, that's changing the whole culture of [the state]. That's not just changing the community. That's changing all of [the state] because, they're already reaching out to students" (interview, June 27, 2014).

Belonging to this community involves participating. As Gabriel told a crowd, "We are supposed to be a community here, and we are going to share the responsibility of the entertainment" (observation, October 12, 2013). At the same event, Gabriel recognized Shawna for becoming part of this community.

Although there is a sense of community, this does not imply that everything in YVR is perfect and all people get along. Wenger cautions, "Communities of practice should not be romanticized: they can reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, sexism, and abuses of all kinds" (1998, p. 132). Additionally, Johnson (2010) warns that much of the literature on spoken word poetry groups has focused on

the positive and ignored the negative. He urges researchers to take a more critical stance in their studies of these groups because “the notion of community is always a contested concept” (p. 397). It was not until very late in the study that the adolescent poets revealed the tensions they feel with other members of the group:

**Wendy:** So I’m seeing the love and how it’s all about family, but I’m not seeing the negativity?

**Jasmine:** Yeah, we try to hide that really well.

**Wendy:** So where is that hiding?

**Jasmine:** Sometimes during the events there is actual tension.

**Wendy:** I did actually catch something once. I think it was your poem about feminism. And you [said], “I’m tired of (I’m paraphrasing) these stupid poems about women hating men.” And I felt like you were talking to some of the people in the room.

**Jasmine:** Yes. [They laugh.] Even in the last event that we went to, there was a little bit of tension just because we’re wondering who [Gabriel] was going to announce next. And he has a preference.

**Rafael:** I’m here to place. When you go up on stage and you know you want to place, in your mind you’re just like, “Oh, I better beat this person.” [If ] you don’t get the scores you want, you kind of like get really upset. You’ll see it on a poet’s face when someone goes up right after them and they get a higher score. And I guess you can use it as motivation or you can just stay mad at the person for a long time. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Rafael said that he, Nicole, and Jasmine are in competition with each other, which sometimes makes things uncomfortable for these friends. Wenger warns, “A community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations. Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation” (1998, p. 77). Communities are complex. While YVR always felt like a warm, friendly place to me, conflict must arise in any group of people working together over long periods of time.

**Ground Rules: “You are scared as hell and you are still going to push through”**

At every YVR workshop they lead, Gabriel and Mark go over the group’s three rules. The first rule is to be brave. As Gabriel has explained, “Being brave does not mean that you are not afraid. It means that you are scared as hell and you are still going to push through, right? That’s what being brave is.” (observation, January 18, 2014). The second rule is to be respectful. As Mark said:

So treat each other well. When someone is reading, listen to them.

Because you might not think you have a lot in common . . . but when you hear their poem, you might be like, “Oh dang. Yo, we grew up in the same neighborhood,” or “Wow, my mom, too,” or “My brother’s locked up.”

You might figure out that someone you don’t think you have much in common with actually shares very similar stories with you. So being respectful requires you to listen to everyone because all we do here is make sure that we are elevating each voice in the room. Okay?

(observation, October 12, 2013)

The third rule is your voice matters. Gabriel has said that this last rule is the most important one. He describes it as follows:

This space is created for you, okay? You guys, you young people, you are the next generation. Oftentimes you are told to sit down and pay attention because we adults know what we are doing, and we're going to educate you. And in some situations, that's true, but in this particular situation, we want to hear what you have to say. And the sooner you can learn to articulate yourself in a powerful and empowering way, like I said, there's no place that you can't go. (observation, January 18, 2014)

These three rules are essential to YVR and they contribute to a safe space. The rules encourage writers to speak up even if they are feeling shy, they reinforce that all voices in the group matter, and they set an expectation—early on in workshops—that all speakers deserve to be treated with respect.

**Support and Encouragement: “Yo, we right here. We got you. We’re with you. You are not alone”**

As Weiss and Herndon (2001) have written, “If a young writer questions herself and feels supported along the way, then gets to the level of performing her poetry for her peers, she comes closer to understanding herself in the context of others” (p. xviii). YVR creates a supportive atmosphere for young people through various practices.

### *Snapping*

Audiences use snapping to show support for the poets. The poets talked about the

importance of snapping:

**Jasmine:** Well, I snap, personally, because I know how hard it is to go on stage and to perform and to write something and hope it's good and hope the audience likes it. And it's just, I don't know, I personally like hearing snapping. It's like oh yeah, somebody agrees with that or they like that line. It's just like, I try to give as much honest snapping as I can when I hear someone's poem because you opened up and you went on stage and that in itself deserves a round of applause.

**Wendy:** And as a poet, it doesn't disturb you if you hear that?

**Jasmine:** No, not at all.

**Wendy:** If somebody shouts out "spit that" or "mm hmm"?

**Jasmine:** It's sort of like motivation to keep going.

**Rafael:** Yeah, what she said. When you snap or you make any sort of noise to the poet on stage, you're kind of giving them reassurance that they're not just wasting other people's time or just up there sucking. Because the first time I went up there, I was a couple of lines in and there was no noise, and I was like eh. It crushes you a little. It hits you, and you're like, "What am I doing up here?" And once you hear the one person snap or a clap or a cheer, you just kind of take that and you throw it right back at them. You take it in and you're just like, "Okay, if you guys are going to make noise, I'm going to give you a little bit more emotion." It's reassuring. It tells you that you're not completely wasting other people's time. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Snapping is a practice in spoken word poetry culture that lets the poet know he or she is being heard, that the words are connecting with real listeners in that moment.

### *Supportive Comments*

In a classroom, we might see a teacher offer positive reinforcement to students. Perhaps peers will even show support to each other. In YVR, youth members of the group also support their teachers, Mark and Gabriel. When Mark forgot his lines during one of his poems, the group immediately shouted out words of encouragement. “Keep going,” they said. It was interesting seeing him stumble in his poem because the young audience members showed him the same encouragement an adult would give to them. I wonder how often secondary English teachers make themselves vulnerable in front of young people like Mark does on a regular basis; furthermore, I wonder how often students respond to a stumbling teacher the way these poets did with Mark. It seems that YVR is so used to practicing supportive behaviors that these kick in regardless of the poet’s rank. Even teachers need encouragement sometimes. Watching this role reversal was wonderful.

I observed many supportive comments during my time with YVR. The slam host would recognize the deejay, the judges, the poets, and even the audience. “Keep that round of applause going for yourself. Come on. Love yourself,” Gabriel would say to the crowd (observation, October 12, 2013). Often their comments in workshops felt genuine, as when Mark looked at the writing group and remarked, “I’m super proud of you guys for writing” (observation, October 12, 2013). Gabriel was adamant that these shows of love are not acts. He said:

A lot of the emotion that you may see up here from me may look like a performance, but it's so real. I'm so proud of [this last poet]. I'm so proud of anybody who explores their story through narrative because it's not an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of work, dedication, and then to share it is just amazing. She said, "My mother knew that having a coward father was worse than not having one at all." Wow. Like that's stuff that's hard to say and hard to process, and I thought my mother knew the same thing. We made a connection, right? That was beautiful. (observation, October 26, 2013)

### *Projecting Love*

When a poet at the Town Slam delivered an emotional poem about her aunt killing her father, the audience stood, and everyone held out an arm for her, symbolically projecting their love. It was a strange yet powerful moment, and Gabriel later explained that this practice was something they learned from Brave New Voices. Mark responded to the poet in this way:

The most beautiful thing in life in the midst of all the turmoil and anxiety and the fear and the pain of doing a poem like that is the moment when you're just up here, and it's you and the mic. There's a whole audience of people that say, "Yo, we right here. We got you. We're with you. You are not alone." And I think that is unlike many rooms anywhere across the country, across the state. And that's what's beautiful about tonight, so make some noise for that. (observation, November 8, 2013)

These poets practice wounded healing (Hill, 2009). Snapping, offering supportive comments, and even standing and symbolically projecting love are three of the practices YVR uses to maintain a supportive environment. Additional practices include responding to poems, offering writing advice, and engaging in mentoring practices.

### *Poem Feedback*

The feedback Gabriel and Mark provide to the young poets in YVR is minimal, and it seems to be done this way intentionally. Feedback on a series of poems might look like this:

**Mark:** So, who's going to be brave and share? All right.

[Poem 1 read.] Nice. Very good. All right. Who's next?

[Poem 2 read.] Nice. That cat is all over that red water. Crazy.

[Poem 3 read.] Nice. Who's next? . . .

[Poem 4 read.] Nice. That's good. That's a good start. All right. Who's next?

[Poem 5 read.] Oh. Dang. That's a cold-blooded woman in that. All right. Who's next?

[Poem 6 read.] [group laughs] All right.

[Poem 7 read.] Nice. Nice . . .

[Poem 8 read.] W-w-wait. Read it loud so we can hear you. That was good. (observation, October 12, 2013).

Even when Gabriel leads writing workshops, this process looks very similar. The emphasis is more on getting kids to share rather than on criticizing their poems. Gabriel



and Mark intentionally avoid making time for other poets to respond. Mark told me, “I don’t want to give kids license to be critical of other kids’ poems” (interview, June 24, 2014). YVR’s process is very different from the “read and feed” practice that Fisher (2007) observed with the Power Writers group of spoken word poets, where young people cite specific evidence from poems in their comments.

Sometimes the adult group leaders do cite specific details from a poem in their feedback. They often did this with Jasmine’s work. When she performed a love poem, for example, Gabriel responded by saying:

Wow. “I love you. If you don’t feel the same, please pretend like this was a poem.” Wow. Do you ever hear a line and think like, “Why couldn’t I have thought of that?” That was a line that I wish I would have thought up. Right there, man. “I want to dress up like you for Halloween. For Halloween, I want to dress up like you when you loved yourself and show up on your doorstep.” Wow. Oh man. That brought tears to my eyes, right there. Woo. Ha. Cool. (observation, July 19, 2014)

Jasmine’s work is full of such deep lines. In response to another one of her poems, Gabriel remarked, “‘I sleep.’ What was that line? ‘With my feet backwards to see if my feet are the restless ones instead of my head.’ Damn! For reals. Like, I’ve never done that, but I feel like, man, that’s a great line” (observation, February 15, 2014).

Mark would sometimes comment on a poem in a way that would have other writers reflect back on their work. At one workshop he asked, “What did [name] do that the other poems didn’t do? . . . There’s a story to it. How is she framing her story differently? . . . Who is speaking in her piece? What’s speaking, I guess? Objects. All

right. So she did it [differently]. Did anyone else do that, make the things in their poem speak? Something screams, right? All these things are talking, right? Cool” (observation, November 23, 2013). In general, however, feedback tended to focus on general encouragement rather than on the language of the poem.

Usually Gabriel would make a larger statement about the issues the poem brought up. For example, in response to a poem about being transgender, Gabriel told the audience, “One of the most beautiful things about this job is the many diverse stories and individuals that we get, and we come together all in one community. We share. We grow. And as an adult and as a teacher, it’s an opportunity for me to sit back and be the student. And I really appreciate that” (observation, April 19, 2014). In response to Stacey’s poem, Gabriel said:

All these poems, young people continually remind me of a very important thing. If I could recall the high school and the middle school ages, it was really crazy. It was. And a lot of you guys know my story. These adults could tell you their own stories. And I know this may sound funny because it was a joke earlier, but seriously, stay strong. It does get easier, man. It does. As you grow older, get through these hard times, you take them, you know the saying, you take lemons and you make lemonade. Like stay strong. You know what I’m saying. Keep expressing yourself, telling your stories, but most importantly, stay strong because it does get easier, it does get better. As long as you stay on that path to progression. So put your hands together for [Stacey] one more time. (observation, March 15, 2014)

I noticed that Gabriel’s comments often dealt with the power of storytelling or the power

of the community they shared. He said in response to a poem, “It’s so beautiful. It is so inspiring for me to be able to sit back there and listen to young people speak such beautiful, strong verse. And like, for me, I forget sometimes, you know what I mean, what it is to be a human being. And that’s why these events are so beautiful. Thank you to all the young people who are spitting and sharing their souls up here” (observation, March 15, 2014). Through his comments, Gabriel shows that intergenerational encounters (Fisher, 2005a) work in both directions, that leaders learn from younger members, too.

Occasionally Gabriel or Mark would focus on the writing process. When a teaching artist performed, Gabriel said, “Thank you very much. I appreciate you. It’s so beautiful because I remember him telling me that story and now to hear it in terms of creative writing is beautiful” (observation, October 26, 2013). In response to a poet who wrote her poem that day, Gabriel said, “She wrote that poem in our workshop. She didn’t even have a poem, and she wrote it” (observation, March 15, 2014). At one event, Mark responded to a poet by saying, “Look at you, making steps” (observation, September 20, 2014).

### *Advice*

The leaders of YVR offered advice to the young poets. Sometimes this advice had to do with writing, as when Gabriel said, “Here’s one thing to always keep in mind. For every poem you write, they say that you should read 10 poems. Is that right? 10 poems for every poem you write? So read other poetry, recite other poetry. There is nothing wrong with that. It actually adds to the flavor of what’s going on” (observation, October

12, 2013). Gabriel encouraged them to read to become better writers.

In regard to being prepared for speaking, Gabriel advised:

Success is . . . when preparation meets opportunity. When you're given an opportunity for something, if you're prepared for that opportunity, the chances of your being successful are more likely. Simple as that. So how do you prepare for opportunities that you may not know come? You train. Right? And this is something that's very relative and relevant in terms of art. Right? You are constantly training. You are constantly practicing your poem, your presentation, whatever it is. You never know who you're going to meet in an elevator. So be prepared to speak, okay? Public speaking is a skill. It is not a talent. I promise you that. Because I was afraid of public speaking, and I was horrible at it. (observation, October 26, 2013)

Gabriel advised them to practice their poems and to practice speaking so they can make the most of future opportunities.

### *Mentoring*

Like the positive comments poets would give each other, mentoring was not a top-down practice. I observed an instance of a teaching artist asking Nicole for help on a poem. Nicole reflected on this event:

He was like, "[Nicole], can you come help me with this poem? I don't know how to word it." And then he took my advice. And I was just like, "Oh my god." And [Gabriel] was like, "That's awesome." And it's cool

because [the teaching artist] has helped me a lot too, so it was really awesome for him to come to me and ask me for advice. I was like, “Is this really happening?” Like in my mind, like on the outside I was all cool and calm and collected, and on the inside I was like, “Oh my god. I need to make sure I make the right decision.” (interview, December 26, 2013)

An adult poet Nicole looked up to also respected Nicole’s work enough to ask her for advice.

At the same time Nicole was helping an adult teaching artist, Jasmine was in another area of the room mentoring Stacey. Jasmine talked about how she is taking on more of a mentoring role, both in the group and at school:

I’ve never considered myself a role model for people, but I guess slam poetry’s just like, “Hey, you are. Let’s put this in your face. Even teachers themselves will be like, “Do you have an idea for this, or how can I execute this lesson plan?” I’m just like, “Okay, I’ll show you an idea for how you can do this.” At our school, we’re widely known for doing spoken word, and [other students are] like, “Hey, can you help me with this and that?” So it’s like you’re a role model for them. Or sometimes people will be like, “Hey, she does spoken word poetry. Hey, can you make a metaphor for me? Hey, can you like describe me right now?” So it’s always interesting to do that. Um, they come to us for help a lot, students, because they want to start creating and writing and they want ideas and they’re not really sure how to do this, how to say it or how to perform it. And it’s just like, we’ve always been like, “Okay, you can do

this or that.” And we’ll just give them examples, and they’re really grateful for it. It’s sort of funny and weird to know that we’re role models because we feel like we are still in development so it’s really strange to like be a role model for someone else. (interview, December 26, 2013)

I watched Jasmine and Nicole mentor poets on other occasions also. In a November workshop, Jasmine tried to help a poet begin writing by recommending the person make a list of people and objects related to the topic. In July at the art museum, I watched Nicole check on a group. She said, “Do you guys know how to do it? It can be any place you think of as home” (observation, July 19, 2014).

Mark and Gabriel are key mentors in this group. When I asked Jorge if mentoring is important in the group, he replied: “Yeah, because you definitely need somebody to relate to. Sometimes it’s difficult to relate to your own peers. They have no advice to really offer. Whereas somebody who’s much older, somebody who has gone through what you’re going through, um, they’re able to relate. They’re able to give you advice” (interview, June 27, 2014). Gabriel and Mark have been crucial for Jorge’s development as a spoken word poet.

I asked Mark about his role as a mentor in the group, especially how his poems must serve as models for the younger poets. He commented:

Yeah, that’s tricky. Sometimes you go do like six, seven poems, blow these kids’ minds, and they’re like, “Jesus, that guy’s [so good].” And they’re like, “That’s certainly never going to be me,” and that’s because there’s this myth in our culture about Michael Jordan. Young people look at someone like Michael Jordan and think, “Michael Jordan was born

Michael Jordan.” You know what I mean, like he was just struck by lightning and chosen, you know? It’s because he re-wove his own fate. When no one was looking, he took his dream, his basketball, and he attacked all of his weaknesses, attacked all of them. He said, “I can’t shoot with my left hand. Yeah, I can. I’m going to shoot a hundred jump shots with my left hand before I leave, you know, in this gym, today.” And he did. He had 10,000 hours and all that, you know. You gotta remind them of that because otherwise you don’t get that shy kid coming out of their shell because usually they’re the ones that are like, like once they really get it, they’re like, “Oh shit. I can’t say this. I can’t say anything.”

(interview, June 24, 2014)

Mark is a talented poet who inspires the young writers in the group. It is unclear if any newcomers show up at Saturday events or at after school poetry clubs on their high school campuses and then do not return because they cannot compete with such an accomplished poet. Gardner (1982) has acknowledged the tension adolescents feel as they compare their work to that of experts, which can lead them to give up.

This section explores some of the ways that YVR maintains a safe space for storytelling. Specifically, the group uses “safe space” language, emphasizes community, upholds ground rules, and offers support and encouragement. It is important to recognize that YVR is not the first spoken word poetry group to emphasize a safe space. In fact, it may be that a safe space is a necessary condition for youth spoken word to flourish. The Poetry for the People poetry workshop uses the following rule, for example: “The

People' shall consciously undertake to respect and to encourage each other to feel safe enough to attempt the building of a community of trust in which all may try to be truthful and deeply serious in the messages they craft for the world to contemplate" (Jocson, 2008, p. 68).

What I find interesting about YVR is the extent to which they use "safe space" language and practices to build a loving place where young people can thrive. Hull and Schultz (2002) have called for literacy researchers to understand the "helpful divisions of labor between schools and formal classrooms and the informal learning that flourishes in a range of settings" (p. 53). It could be that the safe space so characteristic of YVR is possible precisely because the organization operates on the weekend in a public library. This clear division may serve to make sharing safer in this out-of-school space than it would be in schools.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter shows, YVR is a community-based youth spoken word poetry group with distinct characteristics and practices. The group can be described in terms of its history, attendees, settings, practices, tools, purposes, and challenges. YVR also offers multiple paths for engagement; specifically, members can engage in different levels of participation, move on trajectories, connect to a global community, and cross boundaries between groups. Finally, YVR provides a safe space for learning. It does this by using "safe space" language, fostering a sense of community, establishing ground rules, and offering support and encouragement. These features and practices make YVR a unique writing community in the urban Southwest.



It is essential to keep in mind that YVR operates in a region that has seen controversial legislation of late (e.g., bills banning ethnic studies and permitting racial profiling and LGBT discrimination). Wenger writes, “Communities of practice are not self-contained entities. They develop in larger contexts—historical, social, cultural, institutional—with specific resources and constraints” (1998, p. 79). YVR exists in the midst of these tensions—and in contrast to them. This spoken word poetry group offers an empowering, safe space for adolescents from all backgrounds to develop their voices as they critically examine their communities and seek change.

At these events, literacy is used as “social memory” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 144). Also, as poems are introduced in this space, they interact with not just the people and the context but also with what came before and what will come next. The words shared in YVR are utterances in a larger chain (Bakhtin, 1986), and participants shape the space through the words they add. YVR is a site of conversation.

## CHAPTER 5

### POET FINDINGS

How do adolescent members of Young Voices Rise (YVR) view their writing and themselves as writers? What changes—personal or writing-related—do adolescent writers attribute to their experiences in YVR? What changes have others noticed in these writers? This chapter takes up these questions by drawing from case studies of six adolescent poets: Jasmine, Nicole, Rafael, Jorge, Stacey, and Shawna. The following areas are discussed in this chapter: (1) Listening to the poets, (2) Distinct writing practices, (3) Strong sense of writing self, and (4) Perceived changes.

#### **Listening to the Poets**

At the third interview, the adolescent participants in this study performed two poems each. Then we played back their video-recorded performances, and poets were free to stop the recording at any point to comment on the poem. Below, I present an excerpt from each poem, poet commentary, and general notes about each poet. [Note: Poems are presented here as they were sent to me. I have not edited poets' writing. Also, Shawna is not represented in this section because she did not participate in the third interview.]

#### **Jorge: “I’m worth making memories with”**

Jorge is an advanced poet who performs his poems from memory. He uses carefully considered gestures, showing his Brave New Voices training. On several

occasions Jorge talked about how poetry has helped him grow up and become a man. His adolescent years were difficult because he was still working through the death of his father, who was murdered when Jorge was just an infant. Later, when his mother remarried, Jorge had to learn to accept his stepfather, who is Black.

The poem about his biological father was the first spoken word poem Jorge wrote, and it expresses the sadness, anger, and frustration of having to live without his biological father. An excerpt from the poem follows:

. . . I was three months old  
and getting no love from you papa  
Green paper was your only concern,  
I was the least of your worries  
or at least that's how it seemed.  
as your bags of money were stacking  
the hunger I yearned  
for a fathers love  
grew like a black hole with no boundaries.  
How the fuck  
Was I supposed to compete with this magical dank weed,  
and this snow white powder that made you so happy.  
By providing you with food,  
fancy clothing,  
and most of all  
females,

to please your every sexual desire.

All I was ever, able to give you were used diapers

and time to wait on a baby you had no love for from the start.

I was a burden to you,

all I ever wanted was just a little bit of your love.

Just a little bit of your time to show you that

I'm worth making memories with,

to show you, that I'll be someone

with the life you blessed me with . . . (collected July 11, 2014)

When he performs the piece, Jorge imagines he is talking to his father.

It was through the poetry club at his school that Jorge first began working on this piece, and it took several months for him to write and revise it. He struggled with the idea that his family might hear the poem, and he also was not sure if he had all the facts right, since events took place while he was an infant. While working on the piece, Jorge received feedback from Mark, Gabriel, and poetry club members. Gabriel helped him with the vocabulary in the piece.

“[Poetry] helped me to understand that I am not my dad. I am my own person. It really helped me to become a young man,” Jorge said (interview, June 27, 2014). He believes that this poem helped him become more comfortable with being open and vulnerable. Mark, who has known Jorge for several years, said about him, “It’s his story, and I feel like having told it, it’s easier for him to step into the world. Just like with any one of these kids’ stories” (interview, June 24, 2014).

The second poem Jorge shared with me was also the second poem he ever wrote.

In fact, he wrote it all in one day, feeling much more confident by that point. He used his phone and a journal as he wrote the piece. Jorge celebrates his stepfather in this second poem. The piece highlights the different cultural customs they have, but it does so in a way that embraces their differences. An excerpt from this second poem follows:

You see, the man who raised me  
Is my pops, my step dad  
He's been by my side since I was two years old  
With his black hands he taught me to respect others  
and how to shoot a basketball  
he taught me the importance of responsibility  
and how to converse with girls . . .  
However, I remember how my grandmother  
would warn me as a boy  
To stay away from my stepfathers black children  
But those are my brothers and sisters . . .  
I love my grandmother  
And I forgive her for not seeing then  
That my pops is my  
my life mentor  
And I'm thankful for my mother  
For being so strong when my tios and tias would criticize her  
I'm grateful that she chose to marry my pops  
And even though the pain in my heart for never having really known my

biological father aches  
I'm blessed to have my pops in my life  
If only those who were drowned in racial ignorance could see  
How blessed I am  
To be able to dance banda at a quince while my brothers krump at a cipher  
How fortunate I am to be able to rap while my primo's sing corridos  
I get to eat bean tostadas while my pops eats his chitlins  
I await for the day that my tio's and tia's will open their eyes and realize  
that happiness comes from acceptance rather than rejection (collected July  
11, 2014)

Jorge wrote this poem to “obliterate racism in [their] family,” “to illustrate the racism that goes on between Latino and African-American communities,” and “to show appreciation for [his] stepdad” (interview, July 11, 2014). His time in YVR gave Jorge the courage to speak out about matters that have affected his life.

Jorge's stepfather and mother heard him perform this poem at a YVR event. He said, “My dad, I think he's developed a sense of new respect for me because not only has he seen me as his son, but he's seen me as a young man. He's able to see what goes through my mind, you know” (interview, June 27, 2014).

Jorge believes these two poems are more personal than other poems of his that address social issues. He talked about how the two poems fit together: “Well [the first poem] is part one, and [the second poem] would be part two, the continuation. So I've come around and realized . . . this is who I am now. This is what I had to go through in addition to my pain. This is the other side that I had to experience. That's something I

needed to begin before I began my life as a writer. It's one of those barriers that I had to overcome" (interview, July 11, 2014). Through this writing, Jorge has realized he is proud to be his own person and not someone living in the shadows of his biological father. He is also proud of how much he has grown through this journey.

**Nicole: "Swim the hallways"**

Nicole is a thoughtful poet who spends time developing beautiful metaphors. In one of the poems Nicole performed for me, she compares attending school to swimming, and the poem follows this metaphor through to the end as she compares graduating to being poured out of a kid's pool. This poem addresses multiple school cliques, and Nicole shows maturity in the ways she represents different students and what they are feeling. Consider these lines:

This is for Briana.

This is for the girl in my speech class

Who killed herself freshman year.

This is for the kids who graduate with straight A 's

and the kids who won't

even make it to graduation day.

Swim the hallway . . .

This is for the kids who eat lunch by themselves

and hide out in the bathrooms.

For the kids who leave the second the bell rings

And the kids who stay on campus until the security kicks them off because

they're afraid of going home  
Swim the hallways . . .  
keep swimming those  
mystery liquid  
black foot marked  
Gum stained hallways  
For 4 years, 552 days, and 33,120 seconds.  
Because if you can keep treading the water  
for 4 years, 552 days and 33,120 seconds.  
You'll get dumped out of this kitty pool  
and released into the  
ocean full of

Endless opportunity (collected July 21, 2014)

Nicole said, "All the little lines where I say, 'This is for . . . ' 'This is for . . . ,' there's usually a person or a group of people that I've noticed from school that I wanted to put into it. And so I kind of just wanted to make sure that I touched on everybody and made sure everyone was included" (interview, July 21, 2014). She imagined all of these groups as the audience for her poem. When Nicole performs the piece, she emphasizes the line, "Because they're afraid of going home." She explained her reason for this: "You need to realize that there are kids like that, and I feel like that's an important group of people that needs to be recognized because a lot of people forget" (interview, July 21, 2014).

She wrote this poem during a poetry workshop with Mark. They watched a video, did some brainstorming, and when she came up with the line, "Swim the hallway," the



poem quickly fell into place. Nicole did find it challenging to figure out some of the phrasing, and she also had to do some math calculations for that piece. She is proud that she was able to honor the different kinds of kids who go to high school.

The second poem Nicole shared deals with love and her fears about getting hurt again. She uses the metaphor of a building, specifically, a tower:

. . . The foundation of this tower is now set in place  
And when you build a building you can't start at the top  
But I'm already looking at the blueprints for the end  
Where we are no longer lovers,  
And No longer friends,  
We will be back to where we started  
Stuck on the rooftop with the memories of us,  
In clouds of thoughts of us and what we had.  
We will be Trapped inside this skyscraper of mind  
This building finished earlier than expected,  
Some floors in the design are not included  
Trying to get out if it is virtually impossible,  
A long journey down flights of spiral wooden stairs is apparent to be the  
only way out.  
And sadly we weren't thinking about this even though we were the  
architects who designed it  
We were so anxious to get into this building and forgot possibly later we  
might want out.

Each floor is a reminder of everything that happened . . . (collected July 21, 2014)

Nicole said she wrote this poem because she was nervous about being in a relationship again. The poem gave her a way to express her feelings before committing to a new relationship. Like the first poem she shared, this second poem has an extended metaphor running through the poem.

She talked about her audience for this second poem:

I was trying not to think of what my boyfriend would think when I was writing it because I didn't want to try to conform to what he would like. I was like, "I need to put how I really feel," so it was kind of more of myself kind of audience. And of course I thought about the audience and stuff, and which details I think they need to know, but mostly I thought about myself and what things I need to show. It's weird. I think about myself and the audience, just like what parts of myself do I want to make vulnerable out of the situation, that I want to show to the audience. Plus then that's how you relate with people in the audience and you connect, and you bring people in, and all that stuff—all the good stuff of slam.

(interview, July 21, 2014)

The poem began with the idea for the building metaphor. Then she was able to type up the whole poem all at once. It took about a week for her to revise the poem. The writing tools she used included her notebook and a computer. In fact, writing directly on the computer meant that she could save work on her Google Drive and then revise later from her phone. Several people have helped Nicole with this poem, including Jasmine, Mark,

and a local professional poet. She is proud of the building metaphor in the piece.

Comparing these two poems, Nicole said they are similar in how they use line repetition and how they are both emotional works. She added, “They’re not so serious or the political pieces that I typically try to write. They’re also similar because of extended metaphor. But they’re different in the topic that they’re about and [their] structure. I feel like [the building poem] is more of a story . . . and the [hallways poem] is more a generalized statement of different people” (interview, July 21, 2014). These two poems show different sides of this poet, and yet they reveal her skill in working with extended metaphors.

### **Jasmine: “I’m a walking contradiction”**

Like Nicole, Jasmine has a compelling way with words. Her lines are often deep, and she is a philosophical poet who embraces contradictions and plays off words:

I’m a walking contradiction  
i wear flower crowns and nirvana t shirts  
i say what i want but don't say what i mean  
i like smoking cigarettes on the rooftop  
because it makes me feel like a 1990s sitcoms bad girl  
and  
i like chocolate milk . . . . a lot  
i'm terrible at small talk but love conversation  
and if during our conversation i raise my hands above my head just know  
that i'm internally yelling for you to understand my metaphors

im a sucker for strangers with nice smiles and wandering eyes  
but i will always prefer the spines of novels then the arch of a human  
being  
because novels  
are much more stable  
and less likely to fall apart in my hands . . .  
and I am always constantly wondering;  
if I sit long enough in a dark room  
will I develop like film  
or  
was this all just a waste  
of  
time? (collected July 21, 2014)

Jasmine said in our interview that it is hard finding the right degree of vulnerability in love: “To reveal so much of yourself to one person and then have that person not accept you . . . for them to leave. That’s always been a really touchy subject with me. So that was when I was like okay, ‘I don’t need people. I have books’” (interview, July 21, 2014).

While she did not imagine a particular audience while writing this poem, Jasmine said the poem gave her a way to show herself to others and reveal her insecurities. She wrote this “honesty” poem by piecing together a lot of ideas from her different notebooks. Jasmine received feedback on the piece from a local professional poet; however, that poet wants her to change the piece completely, and Jasmine is not

comfortable doing that right now.

In another poem, Jasmine tackles the theme of love. She writes:

To the last person I will ever love. You are perfect.

Or maybe not.

Although I am still looking for that special someone who drinks moonlight  
like wine

I have learned that love is never what you imagine.

and I know that one day we'll meet each other

Breathless.

We will both see our wandering eyes, tired.

Our bodies' heavy with every heartbreak we carry.

But we will ignore the obvious.

And I know that we won't love each other at first sight because let's face  
it. That only happens in fairy tales and  
this isn't a fairytale.

We will be better.

We will be a beautiful catastrophe set in motion.

Our love will be messy.

We will have bruises between our knuckles for holding each other's hands  
way too tightly.

Sweat layered between our palms, wanting to melt into the pores of each  
other's skin and

Our first kisses will consist of us trying to piece each other just right

So be ready for bumping noses and knocking teeth.

But it's okay. We'll get better, I promise (collected July 21, 2014)

Jasmine said about this poem, "Whatever scenario you have [in your mind about falling in love] doesn't happen. It always happens in the most random places. So I just decided to go with features instead. And even though we'll both have baggage and problems, that I will just love you more, which is why I said that we will ignore the obvious" (interview, July 21, 2014). Jasmine said that the poem shows hints of the writer behind it, especially in the apologies.

In this poem, Jasmine wanted to remind young people that their current relationship probably will not be their last. She did some research before writing this poem; specifically, she called ex-boyfriends to get their perspectives on what had gone wrong between them. Also, she used Google to research the definition of love.

As she compared these two poems, Jasmine said she had a hard time letting herself be so honest and vulnerable, but she is proud of her honesty. She said that both poems deal with vulnerability, but the poems address this theme through different topics. "I think poetry is the art of letting go," Jasmine said, "and I [thought] here's a chance where I can put it into a poem, that I'm letting go sort of, so I can move on as a person" (interview, July 21, 2014). This poet believes that her first poem is typical in that it is emotional. However, the second poem is atypical because she usually does not write about love.

Jasmine's poetry tackles abstract ideas, but she grounds these in concrete, vivid details. Her writing seems mature beyond her age, and it is no wonder she placed first in YVR's final slam of the 2013-2014 season. She is a poet among poets.

**Rafael: “Equality for all”**

Throughout the 2013-2014 season, Rafael struck me as an activist poet. His poems tended to be political and addressed social injustices. I was surprised when he performed a poem about the open road:

When I grow old, I want to see this world on an open road.

I want to drive a beat-up RV from 1973.

I want to discover what makes the United State a grand place . . .

I want to take in the beauty of the open road, every twist and turn, every crack and bump upon the blacktop road, I want to feel underneath my feet, as if I were reading braille and discovering an untold tale of what once was dirt roads.

I want to visit every national park and stand there, pretending I’m Teddy Roosevelt, seeing everything for the first time.

I want to see the Grand Canyon during snowfall  
and hope to God I don’t fall in.

I want to hike through Yellowstone, hope I see Yogi the bear.

And I want to gator-wrestle in the Everglades . . .

I want to stop at every truck stop, rest stop, and gas station, just to talk to the old timers about simpler times . . .

I want to lay on top of the hood and gaze at the stars I’ve not seen due to the city lights . . .

I want to sit in front of Mount Rushmore and sip hot cocoa while I’m

having an imaginary conversation with the founding fathers about society and the corruption of their image.

I want to pass my last days breathing in Mother Nature's fresh air discovering the reason why we're all here.

When I grow old, I want to see this country on an open road and truly discover what makes the United States a grand place (interview, July 21, 2014)

When Rafael discussed this poem with me, he made it clear that this was not just a poem celebrating natural beauty. There are larger issues at stake. In regard to the last lines of the poem, Rafael said:

A lot of people see the United States for capitalism, Walmart, McDonalds, these negative things. And when people say "America," they think New York, Boston, big cities, but they don't really think what makes America great, the national parks, the things you can only see here. We concentrate on so many material items, and when you talk about a country and the only thing you can think about are material items or cities and not what the cities sit on, I think that's kind of a waste. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Rafael said he wrote this poem because he needed a new poem for a slam, and he "always wanted to write a poem about things [he wants] to do when [he is] older, [a] retirement plan in a poem" (interview, July 21, 2014). He said, "When I was writing it, the audience I viewed was me in a couple of years. I didn't want to slam the poem because it doesn't sound like a slam piece. It's not something that you would normally hear in a slam, so I guess the audience would be older me and whoever has enough time



to listen” (interview, July 21, 2014). Rafael is proud that he developed a plan for his future, and he feels that his love of exploration comes out in this piece.

The idea for this poem came about when he saw the RV in the television show *Breaking Bad*. This example shows how sometimes elements from popular culture make their way into students’ writing (Dyson, 1997). From there, Rafael started writing the middle of the poem, and then he added the beginning and ending. One of the challenges in writing this piece was researching national parks. When the poem was complete, he shared it with Nicole and Jasmine because he wanted to see their reactions.

In another poem, Rafael addresses a range of social issues, including hunger, poverty, and police brutality. He writes:

It is said that history tends to repeat itself, but I’m sick and tired of reciting  
the same old lines: civilization, colonization, revolution, independence,  
recession, depression, and war.

I feel like we live in a politician’s America, where thugs don’t hustle in  
the street, but make money off the poor in Wall Street.

Where protect and serve becomes neglect and abuse . . .

We live in a first world country, yet inner-city kids still go hungry.

The big issues in this country like immigration, healthcare, and minimum  
wage are used as bases in political campaigns . . .

So let’s rewrite the lines of history.

Civilization, colonization, revolution, independence, progress, wealth, and  
equality for all.

Because once we start to see that the greatest magicians are on capital hill,

we remember that freedom is the greatest magical trick.

Unless you see past the smoke and mirrors, revealing the people pulling the strings. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Rafael wrote this poem as a call for “people to realize what’s going on in their society and government” (interview, July 21, 2014). He said he wanted to make people curious about the issues, so they would go out and research answers for themselves. When I asked about his audience for this poem, Rafael replied, “My age group because a lot of older people, especially in [this state], they’re these old grumpy Republicans who only see one way. And it’s our job as the next generation to see what is going on and what’s going wrong, so we can take that in mind and actually try to correct the imbalance that we’ve seen” (interview, July 21, 2014).

The poem deals with real problems he has witnessed. “There [are] some cops, especially in [my state]. I see how it’s unfair, and I’ve seen it firsthand with the whole racial profiling. Like, it’s something that’s actually happening and it’s actually relevant” (interview, July 21, 2014). Rafael uses poetry to speak out and seek change.

Rafael began writing this piece while he was at an open-mic event. He heard something that inspired him, so he took out his phone and started writing. One of the challenges he encountered while writing was discussing race in way that would not offend anybody. He typically does not seek feedback on his political pieces, he said.

When I asked Rafael to compare these two poems, he responded by saying, “One’s very rhyme oriented. I guess they’re both views of how I grew as a writer. I picked these two . . . because they were very different from each other. One was this whole not political thing that was just a plan that I set for myself, just something

personal. And then the other one was something that I wanted people to hear [to spark] something in their mind” (interview, July 21, 2014). In these two poems, Rafael shows his versatility as a poet.

**Stacey: “I want to use my voice for good”**

Stacey is the youngest poet in this study. In our interview, Stacey shared a poem that explores contradictions. An excerpt from that poem follows:

I wonder,  
did birds used to have fins and not float?  
Did grass hoppers used to skip on lava and ice?  
Would skies be on our right and seas on our left,  
and snakes on our mouths while our heads had turtles?  
Why do we have hands but we use them to hold weapons of war?  
Why do we have eyes if we don't want to see the truth hidden within our  
lies?  
How can we have a heart and not love our enemies?  
Knees don't always support the burdens we carry on our backs,  
so why do our elders still keep their balance while we keep on falling?  
I am grateful,  
that we do not hide in fear under our beds from the terrifying sounds  
outside of gunshots and ticking bombs.  
To not have blood-stained hands and eyes full of regret and the sound of  
children's cries for help ringing in our ears for as long as our bodies

haven't withered away . . . (collected July 26, 2014)

As we talked about this poem, Stacey said, “On that part where it says ‘as long as our bodies haven’t withered away,’ I was [thinking] how soldiers are out there like risking their lives for whatever reasons they have, and sometimes they just come back and they’re like haunted by everything they saw in the war. And they just wish they could disappear” (interview, July 26, 2014). Stacey wrote this poem about problems going on in the world to bring attention to these issues. She said she imagined her audience as people without hope.

Her writing process for this piece was unusual. Stacey wrote part of the poem on a piece of paper and part on her leg. Then she started organizing the poem. Stacey said that organization was the biggest challenge with this piece. When it was finished, she shared the poem with someone who really liked it, and this made Stacey proud.

The second poem Stacey shared in our interview was one she had written much earlier. It does not have the vivid images typical of poems shared in YVR. As the following excerpt shows, the piece is somewhat vague, and it changes tone at the end:

Let me tell you a story .....

and if you're in a hurry

it'll be short so don't you worry

You've hurt us before

and we will let you no more

we've shed many tears

and only blamed our peers.

But i wont shed another tear

for these eyes have dried since many years  
I wont become what I hate  
I am me so get used to it . . .  
I will be the blue rose  
blooming in the cold winter snow  
that has finally found a purpose in life.  
before you strip me from my pride  
I want to use my voice for good  
so that I could stay close to you  
So give me a call  
so we can hang with ya'll (collected July 26, 2014)

In her commentary for this poem, Stacey said, “I think this was the only one I rhymed in. I [wrote this] when I was like really young, like in fifth grade. When you’re a kid, every song or everything that you hear has to be in a rhyme” (interview, July 26, 2014). Stacey originally wrote this poem in her notebook, and then she transferred it to her laptop.

Stacey said this poem is about bullying, and she wrote it because she felt bad for not standing up for someone who was being bullied. She imagined her audience as victims of bullying. Stacey said this poem warns against shedding tears, and that is because she is not comfortable crying in front of others. This poet also talked about how she had a hard time initially sharing this work with others. Unlike most of the other poets, Stacey said she did not get help on these poems. This is not too much of a surprise because she rarely attended Saturday poetry workshops, and there is not a poetry club at her school.

I asked Stacey to compare these two poems. She said, “I guess the only difference . . . is that [for the bullying poem], I actually had someone in mind while I was writing it. The similarity is that I just want someone to read it and feel different from what they were feeling before reading it” (interview, July 26, 2014). Stacey added that these two poems are representative of her other work because they are concerned with equality and with people who are suffering.

In order to write these spoken word poems, the adolescents draw on their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), bringing their out-of-school knowledge to the page. These texts are street scripts, “writings [that] are not just mirrors, but lenses through which they view and reflect on their lives” (Mahiri, 2008, p. 41). Writing these words down can be empowering and help young people “in critique of their social worlds” (Mahiri, 2008, p. 41).

Several scholars (Alim, 2007; Harris, 2006; Kinlock, 2005; Morrell, 2005; Paris, 2009) have argued that we need to value the language of young people. In these poems, these writers are speaking in their own ways about powerful experiences. The words they use matter.

Wenger writes, “Becoming good at something involves developing specialized sensitivities, an aesthetic sense, and refined perceptions that are brought to bear on making judgments about the qualities of a product or an action” (1998, p. 81). The poets in this section demonstrate this sensitivity through their poems and how they talk about them. Their poems show artistry and creativity. Many scholars (Amabile, 1989; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995) have argued that young people need support in

developing their creativity. Additionally, Robinson (2009, 2011) has suggested that creativity will be essential as we face the challenges of the future.

### **Distinct Writing Practices**

The six poets in this study have distinct habits concerning their writing. This section explores the poets' practices in terms of the forms they use, topics they write about, tools they use, when and where they write, and whether they write with others. As in other parts of this work, I try to incorporate a great deal of the participants' own language to give readers a sense of the words these poets use to talk about their writing.

#### **Forms: "You can basically do whatever you want"**

Adolescent members of YVR write in a variety of forms besides spoken word poetry. Jasmine writes horoscopes for her friends. Jorge, Rafael, and Nicole sometimes write raps. Nicole enjoys writing in a variety of other forms including formal poetry, essays, and stories. She mentioned having a preference for free verse poetry, but sometimes she writes in sonnets or haikus. Nicole explained why she likes free verse: "You can pretty much bend it and do whatever you want with it, and like, if you want to set it up in stanzas you can. If you want to have rhyme schemes and patterns, you can basically do whatever you want" (interview, December 26, 2013).

Shawna uses her writing notebooks in different ways. She said,

Like some of it is poetry. Some of it is not poetry. Like some of it is little stories that just so happen to rhyme. Some of them are like, I don't know, I just wrote them. I don't know what they're supposed to be. Some of them

are like little quotes. Some of them are like lists of things that I, of stuff that came to me at the time, and I had time to write it down so I did, and it's sitting there to be picked off of and put into a piece that might be something amazing. I don't know. (interview, December 27, 2013)

Shawna's notebooks are places where she records quotes, poetry, stories, lists, and random bits of information.

Sometimes the poets write in a different form before turning the work into a spoken word poem. Jasmine begins by making a list of ideas related to her topic. Stacey enjoys writing stories, and these sometimes become poems. Stacey explained: "I write it in a story, and then I read it out loud to my sister. She might not understand it, but then she's like, 'I think you should write it like these two lines first. And you should write these lines later, and then separate them into stanzas'" (interview, January 18, 2014).

Unlike the others, Rafael uses freestyle:

When I freestyle, I'm not really rhyme oriented. I used to be rhyme oriented until [Jasmine] told me to cut it out. She's like, "It doesn't make sense. Rhyme doesn't make anything stronger." So when I freestyle, I sort of just shut off my mind. I let words flow. It's more about the idea than the word choice, other than the rhyming. I studied a lot of Eminem's rhymes, and there'll be a middle rhyme and then an end rhyme, and [in] the next line, the last word will rhyme with the middle word and the last word will rhyme back, so it's very elaborate. When I freestyle, I just sort of start talking as if I'm talking to myself, and then it just starts flowing. Later I'll go back and see where I'm repeating myself too much or where I can use a



rhyme or where I can strengthen the idea. A lot of the time I don't because it's weak or something I was just venting on. So a lot of the times when I freestyle, it's just to stop a restless mind. But when there's a topic that's bugging me, and I just have to write about it, I'll freestyle it, listen to it, write it down. And when I do a voice memo, it goes directly into my music library, so I'll just play it like a song, and I'll just write it down. I'll have it on repeat, and I'll do what it actually says on the voice memo, listen to it again, and from the voice memo and the paper, I keep writing and just keep editing it until I have like a rough draft. And from the rough draft I just delete the memo, and I just continue with it. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Rafael's use of voice memos reminds me of Heath's (1983) suggestions for supporting students' ways with words. She recommends allowing young students to audio-record their stories. Some secondary students might also benefit from recording ideas with voice-recorders before sitting down to write.

These poets are writing in an array of different forms besides spoken word poetry, and sometimes these works are later transformed into poems. Emig (1971) found that out-of-school writing tended to involve more pre-writing. The current study supports this finding, and it also supports the notion that out-of-school pre-writing sometimes looks—and sounds—very different from what we typically see in schools.

### **Topics: “It’s fun trying to not be cliché”**

The six poets write about a variety of topics. Shawna mentioned writing about her

stepdad, the government, beauty, and kids who live in Child Protective Services.

Jasmine talked about how she likes to either write to her future self or record stories about others to give the memories more permanence. She uses “writing at once for self-reflection and self-fashioning” (Herrington & Curtis, 2000, p. 356). She said,

[Mostly I write about] life traveling, I guess. Like I’ve never traveled a lot before, but I like to write for the future or mostly future letters to myself when I write. I love to write about people since I like observing people. Or since people will tend to tell me stories, I’m like, “I want to create a poem for you. I want this to keep as your memory.” So I’ll end up writing poems and giving them to the people, like, “This is your story, and you helped me create this poem. I want you to have it.” (interview, December 26, 2013)

It is interesting that she records friends’ stories as poems to preserve them. She is archiving their experiences (Alim, 2007).

Stacey writes about bullying and disability. She said: “I write [about] people who think nobody would understand them, or people like my sister that were diagnosed with like a disability or illness, and when they think they don’t have hope. I just write down there’s hope everywhere they go. And I try to help people like that” (interview, January 18, 2014).

Nicole enjoys writing about politics and love. She said,

I love doing satire and writing sarcastic poems, making fun of the government. Like that is my favorite thing. It’s so funny. I love making fun of anything having to do with public image, politics, government issues with the president, worldwide. Like here in [our state], I love

making big jokes and making them look like a fool. That's my favorite thing ever. That's probably like what I'm the best at writing at. I also like to stray away and write personal narrative stories about my life and things that I've gone through. I like writing, well I love writing love poems, too. Love poems are fun because it's fun trying to not be cliché with love poems. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Nicole and Jasmine's "Good Morning, America" duo poem is a good example of a political piece. It is a wake up call for the American public, and the poets update it often to reflect current events.

Jorge often addresses the topic of discrimination in his poems. He said: "I like writing on discrimination of any type: racial discrimination, gender discrimination, [sexual orientation] discrimination. Um, just discrimination in general. [I also write about] personal experiences, difficult ones, sad ones generally that have really made it difficult for me to move on and grow" (interview, December 22, 2013). Rafael's response was similar to Jorge's. Rafael explained, "Mostly it's political activism, you know. It's equal rights, a lot on immigration, gay rights, a couple of pieces here and there about myself, personal stuff, like that I wouldn't perform, it's just venting. Like how I view myself, how I think others view myself" (interview, March 19, 2014).

These poets tend to address both social issues and personal experiences in their writing. They engage in social critique through their street scripts (Mahiri, 2008) and "work toward empowered identity development and social transformation" (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). Spoken word poetry is a form that lends itself well to these goals.

Jocson (2006a, 2006b) found that writers use poetry for social critique. Spoken

word poetry can be used to illuminate “social realities that are often steeped in the margins” (Jocson, 2011, p. 156), as with Shawna’s poem about kids in Child Protective Services.

### **Tools: “I’m really uppity about it”**

The adolescent poets in this study use journals, notebooks, and even phones for writing and storing their poems. Jasmine said, “I have one journal and I have two notebooks because there is a specific notebook for slam poetry and then a journal for random words and lines I like. And one of them specifically, if I’m reading something and I like a quote from it, I’ll just like write it down” (interview, December 26, 2013).

Jasmine likes having access to books and other materials. She said, “Since I buy books a lot, I usually re-read them, and I highlight. I put post-it notes on it, I’ll be like, ‘I have an idea for this poem, and I like this quote. I want to use it as a metaphor.’ I always have books with me that are highlighted, that I like parts of. So I’ll have books, music, notebooks, [and] usually a packet of tea in case I have hot water” (interview, December 26, 2013). Like Jasmine, Nicole also believes that books are important tools, and she prefers poetry books written by Ellen Hopkins.

Nicole writes in a special notebook and sometimes composes pieces on her phone. Nicole said,

I usually always have a poetry notebook with me, and I’m very, very picky about it. Like it has to be a composition notebook because it can’t be spiral because the spiral, the metal always gets messed up. It has to be a composition book. It has to be college ruled. I have to fill out every page,

and I can't skip pages. I keep everything chronological. So like I'm really uppity about it. I write front and back. I fill every single page up, and I'll go from the very front cover and the first page all the way to the end. And then once I get to the end, I have to get a new notebook and then fill that out in chronological order. I usually just write with a pencil, and I usually edit in different colored pens. And then I also type on my phone and on my laptop on Google Drive. That's where all my poetry is. If I'm on the bus, I'll be typing on my phone, but if I'm at home, I'll just write in my notebook. I usually always have it with me. I have like probably five or six [poetry notebooks] from my freshman year, and they're all filled up.

Sometimes people will look through them and stuff and there will be drawings on some of the pages, and there'll be stuff written everywhere. My social security number's in one of them. There's just a whole bunch of random stuff in there. I don't usually let people read them because it's the thoughts and just puking on the page, and just trying to figure out stuff. I have a feeling like, maybe when I die, it'll be like my legacy to have an original copy of my notebook, you never know. So I just think it's funny to keep track of all those things. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Rafael, on the other hand, tends to use voice memos on his phone rather than write in a journal. He said, "I don't write with pen and paper because I don't feel like it's fast enough to capture everything I'm saying. So I usually use my cell phone, my voice recorder or the voice to text apps. I type them up, and then I lose the paper. I'm not good with paper, so I lose them. I have them on my phone and on my Google drive, so I'm

very electronically connected with my poetry” (interview, March 19, 2014).

(Unfortunately, Rafael ended up losing most of his poems when he switched phones later in the study.)

Stacey favors a certain pencil. She said, “I have this backpack and I get my notebook, and I have this weird looking pencil with me. It’s all, a little broken, with a little Band-Aid. But I remember, I always used that when I was in elementary school, so it helps me . . . be inspired with my writing” (interview, January 18, 2014). I asked her what makes this particular pencil so special. She responded: “Well, when I first got it, it was like brand new, and I remember breaking it at one point, and I was like really scared and I was like sad, so I just went to my parents’ room and got a Band-Aid and put it together like that, and yeah, I never stopped using that pencil” (interview, January 18, 2014).

Shawna talked about having different notebooks she writes in. She said she also writes on her iPod and her phone. Jorge said he writes in a big black journal he received from a former girlfriend. As these examples demonstrate, these poets tend to write in journals and notebooks, but they also employ technology for writing and storing their poems.

“Having a tool to perform an activity changes the nature of that activity,” Wenger writes (1998, p. 59). Tools like cell phones, especially when used with Google Drive, can enable poets to connect with their writing even when they have left a journal behind. From the palm of a hand, a poet can write, edit the work, or even scroll through a poem during a performance.

### **Time of Day: “When I’m trying to sleep and my mind is like everywhere”**

Several poets in this study mentioned writing whenever inspiration strikes. For example, Jasmine said, “I always have a notebook [and] a backpack with me. It doesn’t matter if it’s a line, or maybe a word I find interesting, but I’m always constantly writing. If it’s at school and I can’t get a notebook, I always have my phone, and I’m like, ‘Okay, I have to write down this idea.’ Or I used to have pens with me to write them on my hands. [I’m] always just constantly writing” (interview, December 26, 2013). Likewise, Jorge said, “I write randomly. It just comes, and I’m like, ‘Oh, that’s cool’” (interview, December 22, 2013), and he writes the ideas down.

All six of the adolescent poets in this study said that they prefer to write at night. Jorge explained, “Generally it happens at night, when I’m doing my little quest on what the world is about and what’s going on in the world. My mind just starts really dozing off and going somewhere else, and that’s generally when I start writing, at night time” (interview, December 22, 2013). Rafael, who typically writes at 11:00 p.m. or later, responded in a similar way. He said, “When I’m trying to sleep and my mind is everywhere, I use it to get everything off my mind. And most of the time when I do that, I don’t write anything down. I just kind of freestyle and let it all out so I can sleep. But if it’s good enough, I’ll write down what it was about. If . . . it’s about nature, I’ll write down ‘nature’ and a couple of key words to help me remember it” (interview, March 19, 2014). Jorge and Rafael both write to get things off their minds, but Rafael is not so focused on writing down the ideas verbatim; instead, he records key words to revisit later.

Jasmine likes to write at night, but she does not write in silence. She explained, “It’s usually with something in the background, like a movie, or I’m like watching TV or

something, and [I'm] just really quickly writing and then focusing on something else, and then I get another idea. It gets my brain caught up with what I'm doing" (interview, December 26, 2013). Nicole writes late at night, but she also likes writing in the morning. She said, "I'll just be laying in bed and I can't sleep, so I'm like, 'Maybe I'll write a poem.' And so I'll just type up a poem on my phone. I really like writing in the mornings, and my yard is kind of bigger, and it's kind of like more secluded because we have fences, so I'll just sit in my front yard and listen to music and write. That's probably my favorite time to write, other than at night" (interview, December 26, 2013).

### **Frequency: "Some days I'll feel really inspired"**

The poets' frequency of writing poems varies. Jorge prefers to write two or three times a week, but being a busy college student means he only writes about once a week now. Rafael and Stacey both said they try to write daily. Stacey explained: "I write basically every day. Like whatever pops into my mind, or whatever my sister says, I write it down because everything is just like memorable. I just don't want to forget things, so I write it down" (interview, January 18, 2014). Nicole also writes daily—and sometimes multiple times per day. She said: "I usually try to write something at least once every day, but some days I'll feel really inspired and I'll write a whole bunch, like I'll fill up five pages in a notebook. And then some days [I write] a few words. It's usually at least once a day. I try to write more, maybe two to three times" (interview, December 26, 2013). Jasmine said she writes whenever inspiration strikes.

Shawna said, "It depends. Like, I have times when I'm writing a lot, and then I have times when I'm hardly writing. Um, so I don't know, I guess it just depends on the



time period and how busy I am, what's going on, what's not going on, how much time I have, how much time I don't have" (interview, December 27, 2013).

It seems that the frequency of their writing varies, but all of them engage in some degree of deliberate practice as they work toward developing expertise (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Ericsson, 1996, 2005, 2008; Nandagopal & Ericsson, 2012).

**Place: "In my safest places—that's where I write"**

The poets in this study reported writing in a variety of places. Jasmine tends to write in her room or in the park. Jorge likes to write in his dorm room when his roommate is not there. Stacey, who also has a roommate, waits for the opportunity to write: "Well, I share my room with my sister, so I wait until it's like nighttime, and it's when she's asleep. And I go to my side of the room and stay as quiet as I can and I start writing right there in my little corner" (interview, January 18, 2014).

Nicole mentioned several different places where she writes:

I like sitting outside just in grass and writing. I like writing in my English teachers' classrooms. I like writing here [the library]. I'll write anywhere. I like writing in the car, too, but then I get carsick really easily so I'm like trying to focus on writing, but I'm like ugh. Writing on the bus, too, because public transportation is like a good time to write. I'll just be sitting there going somewhere, and I'll be like, "Okay, I'll write." I'll write pretty much anywhere, anywhere I can. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Shawna also has a variety of places where she writes. She said she often writes at the arts

organization where she works. She added, “And in my room. In my safest places—that’s where I write. I wouldn’t sit and write at my mom’s house because I don’t want anybody to pick it up and read it” (interview, December 27, 2013).

Rafael, on the other hand, prefers to write in a hallway. We had the following exchange when I asked him where he likes to write:

**Rafael:** In my hallway. I don’t know why, but walking up and down my hallway, it kind of just starts flowing.

**Wendy:** That’s interesting when comparing it to school and how we make kids sit in desks in rows.

**Rafael:** I have to be up, and if my body isn’t moving, I can’t like get everything flowing. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Except for Nicole, no one else mentioned enjoying writing in a classroom. Privacy seems to be an important concern for these writers. Also, Rafael needs to be up and moving. These findings might help explain why some secondary English language arts students have such a hard time getting started with writing in classroom spaces.

### **Writing with Others: “Usually, it’s just myself”**

According to the young writers in this study, they write alone the majority of the time. Jorge said, “I have to be alone” (interview, December 22, 2013). Stacey and Shawna also said they write by themselves. Because Rafael uses voice memos, he wants to be on his own when he writes.

Nicole and Jasmine are good friends and they sometimes write in each others’ company or even compose duo poems together like their “Good Morning, America”

poem. Jasmine commented on their writing together:

We'll sometimes go to each other's houses. We're like, "Hey, I really want to work on a poem. Can I go to your house?" So we'll do that for a while. We'll be sitting around, and we'll be like, "That's a really good idea for a poem." We'll write one first, or we'll help each other with our poems. If we have an idea for the other person, we'll be like, "You should add this in your poem or you should take that out." Like right now we are currently working on another duo piece, and it's a love poem actually. It's coming along. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Nicole usually writes by herself, but she talked about how she sometimes writes in the company of Jasmine, her sister, or her cousin.

All six of the participants in this study prefer to write alone. However, this does not mean that social influences are absent while they write. Also, even when they write in isolation, there is a social end (i.e., performance) to the activity. "Even drastic isolation—as in . . . writing—is given meaning through social participation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 57).

This section examines the writing practices of six poets. It explores the forms these writers use, topics they write about, tools they use, when and how often they write, where they write, and whether they write with others.

Wenger explains that imagination allows us to "recognize our own experience as reflecting broader patterns, connections, and configurations. It is through imagination that we see our own practices as continuing histories that reach far into the past, and it is through imagination that we conceive of new developments, explore alternatives, and

envision possible futures” (1998, p. 178). The poets in this study use imagination to see the patterns in their writing practices and, as the next section shows, to explain who they are as writers.

### **Strong Sense of Writing Self**

This section explores poets’ perceptions and attitudes about themselves as writers. The following areas are addressed below: writing history, powerful experiences, sponsors and role models, writing motivation, flow experiences, writing dislikes, overcoming challenges, writing identity, and writing future.

#### **Writing History: “I have talent”**

The poets talked about their writing histories in different ways. Jasmine’s history was incredibly short. She talked about doing poetry competitions in second and third grade and then writing stories for people when she was in middle school. Jorge began his writing history when he entered the poetry club at his high school.

On the other hand, Nicole began her writing history by describing how she learned to read before she was in kindergarten, and she also talked about studying Spanish at a young age. When she entered third grade, she had a positive experience sharing a poem with her class: “I volunteered to read a poem and my teacher told me, ‘Wow, that poem is so good. You talked about bubblegum. You sound like you’re chewing. You did really good at reading poetry. You’re really good at that’” (interview, December 26, 2013). At the time, Nicole was in a small, advanced writing class, and she recalled writing scary stories and different kinds of essays in that class. In middle school,

she was still taking advanced classes, and she won a \$500 grant from an essay contest.

Rafael talked about getting into writing through drawing. He would draw something and then write a description of it. When he was in fifth grade, he wrote a short story that was 20 pages. As time went on and he entered middle school, he became interested in Hip Hop and started writing raps.

When Stacey told me about her writing history, she talked about how shy she was. In first grade, she had to write a short essay, and she remembers that being a positive experience. Eventually, she started writing poems and stories, and she preferred to write rather than go to recess.

Shawna said she started writing poetry in third grade, but it took time for her to improve at it. In fact, on the first day of third grade, her teacher gave her a D on a writing assignment because she had not written enough in the allotted time. That night she went home and wrote two full pages to make up the work; however, when she brought it to class the next day, her teacher told her that it was not actually a graded assignment. Shawna characterizes her early writing as being “horrible” between third and eighth grades. She said, “I look at it and laugh at it, but it was a start” (interview, December 27, 2013). In eighth grade, her English teacher put a lot of emphasis on poetry. Shawna enjoyed that class. She said, “That’s when I really started writing, and it actually made sense and was actually cool. And people would read it, and they were like, ‘Oh, this is good!’ And I was like, ‘No it’s not.’ And they were like, ‘Yes it is.’ So I was like, ‘Okay, cool. I have talent’” (interview, December 27, 2013).

**Powerful Experiences: “Can you read it again, but can you read it in Spanish?”**

I asked the poets to tell me about the most powerful experiences they have had in YVR. Jasmine said:

It was actually the first time I slammed. So I created like something really short in 10 minutes. And like [Gabriel] and two other teaching artists were there, and when they first heard it, they were just like, “Wow, where have you been?” I wasn’t planning to do anything, just my friend convinced me. So that was a big powerful moment where I was like, “Oh, I have talent to do this. I can actually do this.” That was pretty interesting and made a big impact on me. (interview, December 26, 2013)

For her most powerful experience, Jasmine recalled her first slam and the realization that she was good at performing spoken word poetry.

Jorge talked about an experience at the Brave New Voices poetry festival:

I went to BNV and I did my first poem, like my first time ever performing in front of people from like across the world. It was a poem that I wasn’t very confident in. I was like, “It’s my first slam here. Everybody here is so good. They’re so much better than me. I’ve been listening.” And it made me feel really insecure in terms of my writing when I performed this poem about the death of my dad and how it affected me. It was just a really powerful experience I would say because when I was finished, I got a lot more applause than I had expected. I’m not one to care for scores, but the scores were higher than I thought they would be. I had just started writing two months before I went, and now I’m here in California performing to an audience, like writing what I just barely learned a month ago? Whereas

these people have been writing three or four years already. I was like, “What am I doing here? Why am I here? Why did [Mark] bring me? Like, I’m not ready.” But it was a powerful experience because I had worked really hard, and I was always going to practices. This guy from Richmond came up and hugged me and he was like crying. And I was like, “Wow.” That was when I was like, “I’ve gotta keep doing this. I love this. I love the positive energy. I love the fact that this dude actually came up.” That’s not something that happens, a complete stranger comes up to you crying. He was telling me, “Thank you so much because my dad died the same way.” And he was African-American. I’m Mexican. And it’s like two different cultures really coming together, and it’s just like, it totally defeats the barriers that have been built. And it’s like here is this guy from Richmond and here’s a guy from [Jorge’s city], and like we’re in California together meeting each other for the first time, and this dude’s crying. He, you know, he’s hugging me, thanking me, you know, that I had just told the story of our fathers. And it’s like, our story is not just our story. It’s that guy’s story, that lady’s story. It encompasses a large group of people. Even though we come from different worlds, we really don’t. We really do relate. We really are the same. We are humans, you know.

That’s why it was so powerful for me. (interview, December 22, 2013)

Jorge’s experience at Brave New Voices changed him. Not only did preparing for the competition and getting up on stage help him grow, but he also found a larger community of poets. He learned that his story matters to others.

Nicole talked about the Town Slam. She bonded with people in her school poetry club there, and she enjoyed listening to the speaker. Also at this festival, she and Jasmine performed their “Good Morning, America” piece:

It was crazy! I was up there, and I was like, “Man, I hope I don’t forget the poem.” We’ve done that poem a million times, but like you start to forget poems if you’re not reading them constantly. And I was kind of worried about forgetting. So when we got up there I closed my eyes, took a breath, and I was like, “I hope I don’t forget.” And we just did it, and when we were walking off stage, I was like, “Oh my god, we just finished that poem. That just happened.” And then they started reading the scores, and I was like, “Oh my gosh. [The scores were really high.] What is this?” So that was just a crazy moment. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Their poem was really good. I remember being at that slam, and their timing was wonderful. They earned several perfect scores, and the audience roared with approval.

Rafael also mentioned the Town Slam:

It was the first time I was actually around people from outside our school doing the same thing I do and writing about some stuff that I would write about. I met a couple of people that I still talk to, and I’ve met amazing people. It was a [YVR] event, so I got in touch with mentors from other schools and kids, how they write, what they write about. It wasn’t the aspect of winning. It was the aspect of being in the top three that made it like worthwhile, knowing that our team was assembled like two weeks before the tournament. [Jasmine] and [Nicole] were like the only two



people who had more than a year's experience. The rest of us were new. So it was really amazing to see such a young team come together in such an amazing way to like take it all, and especially because we lost to [another school] two years ago. And I became friends with a kid [from another school], and we still bounce ideas off of each other, so it was just really good to see the community like all together. It wasn't really about competition. [During a day of workshops, they] gave out lunch, and it was amazing to see that not everyone went back into their own teams. People sat with people from all around. It was an experience that I'm not going to forget because it shows you that even though you come from different schools, in the end, you're all one community. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Rafael's most powerful experience was the Town Slam, and he gives many reasons for this. It helped him to branch out to a larger community of poets and teaching artists. He was also proud of how his school's team performed. They came together and won the event even though they did not have that much experience among them.

For her most powerful experience, Stacey talked about her mother hearing a poem about Stacey's sister:

Once I was saying a poem about my sister, and I lost track of everything as I was [talking] about her. And when I looked up, when I was done, my mom was right there. And I was like, "Oh no. She heard everything." And then we went back home, and she was like, "Can you read that again, but can you read it in Spanish? I couldn't [understand] you, but I know it was

about your sister.” And then I read it to her, and I saw her crying, and I was like, “Oh no.” I [thought] I hurt her. She was like, “That’s very beautiful.” And then she was like, “If your sister could understand it, I would love for you to say that to her” (interview, January 18, 2014)

Stacey’s poem about her sister made her mother proud. This was a validating experience for this poet.

Shawna shared the following story as her most powerful experience in YVR:

I choked when I was reading my poem. When I was slamming it, I stopped. And half of it was because I couldn’t remember where I was because I was going so fast because I was mostly going off of my memory. The fact that I could hear snaps and everybody was like, “Yeah!” It was just amping me up. And when I choked, I was starting to get emotional, and my voice began to shake. And that was the first time I had ever done that in public. And out of all the stuff that I’ve read, um, for slams, they’re all like heart wrenching. So I don’t know. I guess those were the first poems I ever wrote about my mom, expressing how she makes me feel and the stuff that we’ve had between the two of us. So I don’t know. It kind of threw me off. I felt like everyone was enjoying it, and I was enjoying it. I was having a good time slamming it, but it is really a fresh sore. It’s not like something old that’s happened in the past that I can be like, “Yeah, it happened.” Like that’s something that I still struggle with today, so it was kind of hard reading it and struggling with it. So everybody got to see me bare my soul for a moment. (interview,

December 27, 2013)

In this passage, Shawna talks about how emotional and personal her poems are. She shares these stories in a public forum, but some memories are still painful. Losing control of her emotions but having the crowd's support was powerful for her. These moments provide insight into the benefits of youth spoken word poetry programming.

### **Sponsors and Role Models: "Every time I see him, I'm taking mental notes"**

Sponsors and role models are important to the poets in this study. Brandt (2001) writes, "Intuitively, sponsors seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential authors" (p. 19).

Jasmine talked about a female teaching artist in YVR who has supported and coached her, her friend Nicole, and spoken word poets outside of the group. She said, "Sierra DeMulder and Andrea Gibson use very heavy metaphors, and they layer them and layer them. And I am obsessed with the metaphors they use, even though it sometimes takes a while to fully understand" (interview, December 26, 2013).

Jorge talked about his family, the literary magazine at his university, Mark, Gabriel, and the whole YVR group. The poetry club president at his school was another supporter. Also, teachers at high schools around town have invited him into their classrooms, and he sees that as a form of support for his work. Jorge also mentioned spoken word poets outside the group:

[Mark] and [Gabriel], um G. Yamazawa, um Willie Perdomo, yeah. And

hmm. B. Yung, he's cool. I like his stuff. I really admire them because a lot of them are from the same [kind of] neighborhoods [as me]. These writers are making a difference in the world using their attained, acquired skills, and that's what I admire, their candor, willingness to make a change, you know, their sacrifices, their time dedicated towards giving back to the community. (interview, December 22, 2013)

For Jorge, these spoken word poets have inspired him because of their shared background. In addition, Jorge spoke about how Gabriel and Mark have served as role models for him. He said:

I always consult [Gabriel] and [Mark] before I consider a poem finished because I understand I have a lot of room for improvement. And if they're available, they're open to hearing me, then why not? It would be dumb of me not to do something like that, to consult them and ask them for ways to improve my poem or improve my writing. So their availability and their willingness to help has definitely impacted me greatly because if not for them, I wouldn't know who to go to. I don't have anybody to go to. My family's not very artistic. [Gabriel] and [Mark], they've literally like flipped my life upside down. I was just 100% all sports, all basketball, basketball, basketball. I love basketball, but I also love writing, and they opened that door for me, you know. They attracted me to the writing community, to the poetry community, so they definitely have had a huge impact on my life in terms of writing and in general. (interview, December 22, 2013)

Mark and Gabriel have been important sponsors for Jorge. They have not only given him advice on poems but they have also improved his life.

Nicole talked about her family. Even though she does not invite them to slams, her mom drives her to events, and her aunts and cousins ask about it. Nicole said other supporters include her friends (especially Jasmine), the poetry club at her school, Mark, Gabriel, the YVR group, and a teaching artist who now works in schools across town. Nicole talked about how Mark and Gabriel are role models for her. She said, “I see them do a poem, and I’m like, ‘Okay, let’s see what they’re working on, maybe see what they’re doing, what new style they’re bringing’” (interview, December 26, 2013). Nicole listed Jasmine as a role model, and she also mentioned several published authors:

I really like classic poets. I like reading Henry David Thoreau, and I like his short stories. And I like read Edgar Allan Poe just because he’s a classic. He’s one of the first poets that I remember reading in school. And I really love Roald Dahl. His poetry is like so cartoonish, and it’s just jokish and childish, and I like it. I also really like modern day writers like Suzanne Collins and like Ellen Hopkins who wrote those poetry books, so I have quite a few people that I like to look up to in writing ‘cause there are a lot of really good, talented writers. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Shawna talked about a teacher she had in high school. He noticed she was writing poetry in class, and he encouraged her to enter the poetry contest. He even took her to see Maya Angelou. Shawna talked about how the organization where she works has supported her. They turned her volunteer work into a paid internship, have helped her work toward her GED, and they sometimes come out to YVR functions. Shawna’s role

models include authors like Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. In addition, Shawna talked about how Gabriel and Mark have been role models for her. In particular, she had this to say about Gabriel:

I like how he slams, how his style is, like how he commands the whole room. That's so dope, and I want to be able to do that. So, every time I see him, I'm taking mental notes. It's in my head. But it's cool to be able to see it like in the flesh 'cause all these other [authors], I mean, they're dead or going to die, or you get stuff in books, which I mean is really cool, to see how like they put stuff together, but to see it in the flesh, it's like mind-blowing. (interview, December 27, 2013)

For Shawna, Gabriel is a more important role model than published authors because she can interact with him. He is accessible, teaching her new things all the time.

Rafael cited many people as sponsors for his work, including poetry club teachers and his friends at school. Also, his sister drives him to poetry events and asks him how he did, and Rafael said his older brother has been a role model for him. He explained:

I get a lot of stuff from my older brother. He was an activist. He was part of the, when the [law allowing racial profiling] was going to come into effect, he would take me to rallies and protests and you can really tell in my writing because I write a lot of political pieces. I really like the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and Caesar Chavez. When I do my pieces I kind of envision myself as if I'm them, an activist, so when I perform the political pieces it's like a speech. (interview, March 19, 2014)

These experiences have helped shape Rafael into the political activist poet he is today.

Rafael cited a broad range of writers who are role models for him:

Martin Luther King, President Obama, and Caesar Chavez. I don't really read a lot of poetry, which is actually really bad, but my favorite poets are William Wordsworth and Pablo Neruda. I usually read the newspaper. At my school I'm part of the newspaper team, so I read a lot of articles, and I would say I read a lot of, you know, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, stuff like that. I can't say I have a favorite person I look up to. I guess my writing influences come from activists, Martin Luther King, Caesar Chavez. A lot of who I am and what led up to this [has been inspired by] rappers: Eminem, Ice Cube was a big impact on my life, Grand Master Flash, the people that actually started talking about the tough stuff, so I can't really say that I stay within the boundaries of literature when it comes to people that inspire me. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Rafael's role models include poets, rappers, and political activists.

In most cases, poets kept their family members out of the loop regarding their YVR activities. Jasmine, Rafael, and Nicole said that their family members do not really understand what it is they do, and the poets suggested they prefer it that way. Nicole said her family has seen videos of her poems, but they do not understand that she sometimes performs for rooms full of hundreds of people. On the other hand, Stacey recalled how her mom heard her slam and was impressed: "She was like, 'Oh my gosh. This is the first time I've seen you say stuff in front of crowds.' Even when I was in choir, I didn't like sing. I just moved my lips. She's proud that I'm like writing and stuff. She's like, 'I just

like how there's all these people and they're all writing and they're doing something with their lives'" (interview, March 22, 2014). Stacey cited her family—especially her mom, dad, and brother—as important sponsors of her work. She said that her friends have supported her also.

These poets feel supported by friends, family members, and YVR group leaders. They also look to YVR teaching artists, spoken word poets outside the group, published authors and songwriters, and political activists as role models.

### **Writing Motivation: "I'm too broke to afford therapy"**

The poets described their writing motivation as being driven by different things. Jasmine wants to persuade people to think differently about important topics like race. She also writes to connect with people and let them know there is someone else out there who feels the same way.

Jorge writes because it gives him a chance to advocate for things he believes in. He sees himself as an activist. Jorge added, "I have anger issues, and it's a great way for me to express myself without turning to drugs. It's a great avenue to go down, you know. Writing is perfect. It improves you as a person. It helps you reflect. The more you express yourself, the less you have to bottle up" (interview, December 22, 2013). Writing helps Jorge relieve stress. He also noted that writing has helped him learn about the world and discover who he is. Jorge added that he is motivated by the positive, supportive community of YVR.

Nicole said she is motivated to write because she is good at it and she thinks it is fun. She particularly likes getting on the microphone and speaking in front of a crowd.



Nicole likes the freedom to be able to say what she wants. She said: “I see all of these people actually listening to me, so that’s another reason why that really motivates me is because when I go on the microphone at [YVR], I know that there is at least one person in the crowd that’s listening to me, so it’s nice being able to know that someone’s listening. That’s one of the biggest reasons I write” (interview, December 26, 2013). Nicole knows she has an authentic audience for her writing at YVR events.

Rafael is motivated by the therapy that writing provides. He said, “I see it as therapy because I’m too broke to afford therapy” (interview, March 19, 2014). Rafael added that poetry helps him vent and get through difficult times. Apparently, using spoken word poetry for therapy is common practice. Weinstein points out that there is an abundance “of therapeutic narratives” in youth spoken word (2010, p. 16).

Similar to Jorge, Rafael sees himself as an activist, and he uses spoken word to speak his mind about important issues:

Yeah, I feel like there’s not enough outlets for youth to express themselves. What motivates me to write a lot is the problems going on. I recently wrote a poem based on one of my friends who, we were talking in class, this was in trigonometry, and he told me that he was kind of upset, and I asked him what was wrong, and he goes, “You heard about the new law [allowing discrimination against gays and lesbians]—before it came into effect, or before it got vetoed?” He was really upset cause he’s gay. And he was like, “How can people actually, honestly think that it’s a big problem?” That kind of got me upset. I actually, for the first time, I saw from a different [view]point. It is kind of odd how I can marry a woman,

divorce her, and ruin my kids' lives. And he doesn't even have the chance to marry the person he loves. So I guess it's just a way to like vent and get my message out there because there are a lot of kids who are too afraid to do what a lot of us do. So it's just a way to give people who don't have a voice, or are afraid to have a voice, and give them a voice. My brother was my father figure 'cause I grew up without a father. So my brother always showed me that everyone's equal and that there's nothing you can't stand up to. Even the government can't hold you down in your beliefs. They can't tell you what's right and wrong. Even if they are the government, we the people have the power to change anything that's unjust. So it's just make sure who I am and where I come from, that activist side of me that really feels like if I'm not writing something to help someone out through tough times or to give someone a voice, then I'm not really using the opportunity that I was given to be here in this moment, and to have this opportunity to send a message out into the world. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Witnessing social injustices has motivated Rafael to write. Rafael has been taught to speak out and seek change. He pays attention to current issues and their effects on people, and he incorporates this information into his poems.

Stacey writes to help others who are struggling. She said, "I wanted to write poetry to save someone, like how [Mark] did to me" (interview, January 18, 2014). When speaking about what motivates her to write, Stacey mentioned her sister: "When she was younger, she didn't speak at all. She couldn't speak anything. And then I started writing,

and she started pronouncing the words I would write. It felt very beautiful to see her talk for the first time” (interview, January 18, 2014). She added that she hopes to eventually write a poem that is so great her sister will understand it: “I just want her to know how grateful I am for her, so that’s my goal, to make the most memorable poem before I die” (interview, January 18, 2014). Stacey’s writing motivation is strongly tied to her desire to help her sister.

Shawna is motivated to write because it helps her to deal with things that have happened to her. She can also use writing to help others. She said:

Well, half of it is a release. It’s how I get stuff off of my chest, how I get it off of my mind, which hasn’t really been having the same effect as it used to. Like I used to be able to write, and whatever was bothering me, if it was on the paper, then I was fine after a while. But now it’s not so much. Like I’ll write about it. A little bit later, it’s still on the brain. I’ll write about it some more, so it’s kind of how I vent. I’ve met some really cool kids that have been through some pretty hard stuff. It kind of reminds me of myself, so I write a lot of poems about stuff like that too. Um, it just depends what phase I’m going through in life, what’s going on around me.

(interview, December 27, 2013)

Shawna writes to vent and to tell others’ stories.

Sometimes these poets are motivated to write when they witness social injustices. However, they also write for personal reasons (e.g., as therapy, to vent). Collins and Blot (2003) argue that young people get control of their lives by writing.

## **Flow Experiences: “I don’t know where I’ve been”**

Csikszentmihalyi defines “flow” as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990, p. 4). He describes some of the conditions for flow: “Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous” (1990, p. 71). I wondered if the poets in this study have experienced flow while writing spoken word poetry. Specifically, I was interested in whether they tended to lose track of time.

All of the poets in this study said they have experienced losing track of time while writing. Nicole talked about how this happens:

Usually I try not to write whenever I’m in like crucial time periods. Like say I have like 10 minutes before I have to go somewhere, and I’m just trying to write something. I hate having to worry about that time frame. . . . Sometimes I’ll write for 30 minutes and it will feel like 4 hours, or sometimes I’ll actually write for 4 hours and it will only feel like 30 minutes. I usually do get lost in the time. I’ll just be so focused on writing, and then I’ll look up at the clock and I’m like, “Crap, it’s like 5’oclock in the afternoon. I was supposed to do a whole bunch of stuff! Oops!”

(interview, December 26, 2013)

Stacey said, “I was once writing when I was really mad. It was like 8 p.m., and once I stopped, I was going to go to sleep, but I couldn’t. And then I looked at the time,

and it was like 5 a.m. I was like, “Oh my goodness! I was this mad?” (interview, January 18, 2014).

Shawna also talked about losing track of time:

Yes, oh my god. It was light outside when I was writing. And I plugged in my Christmas lights, so I mean, I don’t know. I guess I wasn’t really paying attention to time, but the sun faded out and the Christmas lights were the brightness that were going on. I was in the kitchen, and somebody had knocked on my window, and I was like, “It’s dark outside?” And they were like, “Where have you been? Like your window’s open.” And I was like, “I don’t know. I don’t know where I’ve been” (interview, December 27, 2013)

All six writers reported losing track of time while writing. They seem to get completely into the experience of writing, enjoying the work and committing to it in a highly focused way, similar to the flow state describe by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

### **Writing Dislikes: “It’s like one of my biggest pet peeves”**

When asked about their writing dislikes, the poets covered different topics. Shawna said she dislikes writing essays. Stacey’s answer was more abstract: “There’s nothing really wrong with writing. Writing is like its own thing. There’s nothing to be liked. There’s nothing to be disliked. It’s just how it is, like how you feel you write it” (interview, January 18, 2014).

Jasmine talked about how it is difficult to stay on topic. Jorge said he dislikes grammar. Rafael does not like it when he has writer’s block, and he also struggles to

memorize pieces. Nicole responded by focusing on rules. She does not like it when people tell rather than show. Also, she does not like it when someone goes up to the microphone with a long preface about a piece. She believes this shows a lack of editing.

Weinstein found that youth spoken word poets “begin to see themselves as writers and to act on that self-perception” (2010, p. 2). While the YVR poets’ writing dislikes deal with a range of different issues—writer’s block, telling rather than showing, grammar, essays, staying on topic, etc.—the similarity running through their responses is a sense of definite preferences. Only Stacey, the youngest writer in the study, was not concrete with her writing dislikes. All of the others were adamant about their writing dislikes and pet peeves.

### **Overcoming Challenges: “Trying to find the balance”**

All of the poets were able to think back to a writing challenge and recall what had happened and how they had worked through the experience. Jasmine talked about writing “Good Morning, America” with Nicole:

It was the first time I had ever done a duo with someone, so that was strange, working with someone on writing because our writing styles are both different. Hers is satire and mine is really emotional. And to balance them out in a political piece, it’s really a fragile thing because I’m not used to it. And first I’d have to be like, “Is this line okay?” And [having] someone editing your lines . . . is strange. Also, that was my biggest writing challenge because it was my first satire piece as well. I’m not used to writing satire pieces. It took us a really long time to edit that poem into

what it is today, and we're still working on it since politics are always changing, so we're always having to add new stuff to it or always having to take out, but that was the biggest challenge I've ever faced with poetry.  
(interview, December 26, 2013)

It sounds as if this poem presented multiple challenges for Jasmine. She was confronted with having to write with someone else and with writing satire.

Jorge talked about struggling with a poem:

I was writing a poem, and I couldn't really elaborate. I didn't know what direction I was going in. I talked to [Mark and Gabriel] about it, and they were like, "Dude, make it funny." I didn't know how to make it funny. I didn't have music on at the time, and now I listen to musicians who don't have words in their music, instrumental music, Beethoven, guitar, flamenco music, um jazz, stuff like that. The music is like grabbing my brain with the tandem, like squeezing the juice, the words out of it, so I definitely have to listen to music. That's something that I've learned and now [when] I write, even when I'm writing research papers, when I'm writing other kinds of papers, it helped me learn my writing habits, the ones that make me feel comfortable when I'm writing. You know? So, that's how I dealt with that in terms of finishing that poem. (interview, December 22, 2013)

It sounds as if Jorge has altered his writing practices to avoid getting into this situation again.

Nicole talked about overcoming writer's block. She said with the new BNV

season, it was challenging to figure out what to write about and what to say. To overcome that, she brainstorms ideas for poems. She said, “Anytime I get an idea for a poem, I’ll just write it down in a notebook and then just keep doing that, and then I’ll have to come back and like look at it and analyze it and be like, ‘Can I develop each of these ideas further? Can I keep going? Can I edit these anymore, or should they just stay how they are?’” (interview, December 26, 2013). Nicole has developed strategies to avoid the problem of writer’s block altogether.

Rafael talked about the challenge of performing for an audience. He said:

The biggest challenge for me was performing and finding the voice to use up on stage. . . . I was stressing about it. And I guess how I got over it was practicing and performing in front of the poetry kids, and it was obviously a political piece. The way I kind of got through it was listening to Caesar Chavez and Martin Luther King and how they give their speeches, and I kind of like took on that speech type of way of performing. So a lot of times when I do my political pieces, it’s because I was faced with that challenge [of] performing the first time, and a lot of times I do the pauses like Martin Luther King, and I kind of like emphasize, and it really does sound like a speech, but at the same time it does have the elements of poetry. (interview, March 19, 2014)

When Rafael struggled with a challenge—performing for the first time with the right voice—he turned to his political activist role models for guidance.

Stacey talked about the challenge of reading an essay out loud for her third grade class. She remembered cutting a lot out so she would have less to say. She said, “I started



regretting that. I should have just read out the whole thing because now it was with no details and stuff like that. So that was a challenge. I should have just read the whole thing and not rewrite it and make it shorter” (interview, January 18, 2014). Her solution to the problem of reading the piece out loud was a mistake she did not want to repeat.

Shawna shared this story: “The day of that [Town Slam], I didn’t have a poem, and I was supposed to, so that morning I was like, “I have to write my poem because I don’t have anything new, and I don’t want to read anything old.” So I took a poem and then these two half poems that I hadn’t finished, and I put them all together” (interview, December 27, 2013). Shawna acted quickly and resourcefully so she would have something for the performance.

These stories reveal that these poets all face writing challenges, but they are persistent and creative in how they address those challenges. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) have demonstrated that both opportunities and obstacles are important in the formation of adolescents’ identities. The stories in this section demonstrate resilience on the part of each writer, resilience that has enabled them to work through challenges. These stories also show that the writers are able to self-regulate (Zimmerman & Labuhn, 2012) and take control of their writing.

### **Writing Identity: “I’m a writer”**

When I investigated youth songwriting (W.R. Williams, 2013), I found that the participants, Bradley and James, were proud of their songwriter personas and wanted to become known for their writing, which motivated them to spend hours upon hours composing lyrics and making beats. I was curious to see if a sense of writing identity—

specifically, identifying with *being* a spoken word poet—would be important in the current study. As McCarthy and Moje have argued, “All learning—and literacy learning, in particular—can be conceived of as moments in identity construction and representation” (2002, p. 233).

Ivanic (1998) argues, “Writers see themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors, and present themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors” (p. 26), and “it is part of what the writers bring with them to the act of writing” (p. 27). Ivanic adds that this aspect of writing identity can influence writers’ decisions regarding content and form.

All of the poets in this study identify with being spoken word poets. Jasmine said:

Yes, heavily yes. Because I’ve never really had hobbies I’ve been really passionate about. It’s only ever been music. So when I found out about spoken word poetry, that’s like a different kind of music for me. Because with music, you have lyrics, you have words, you have a tone, [and] you have a rhythm. With spoken word, you have to have a tone and rhythm and everything to get your audience to be captured into it. So I consider that one of my main identities as well. (interview, December 26, 2013)

Jasmine’s identity as a spoken word poet seems related to her identity as a musician.

Jorge also sees himself as a spoken word poet. He said, “Yeah. I’m not a professional. And I don’t intend to be. However, I do intend to continue like writing and showing up at open mics. I really like being an activist, and I’m really interested in social issues. My poems make a difference in somebody else’s life” (interview, December 22, 2013). Although he sees himself as a spoken word poet, Jorge does not believe he is on a professional track like Mark.

Nicole's response was simple and straightforward:

**Wendy:** Do you consider yourself a spoken word poet?

**Nicole:** Yes.

**Wendy:** Would you say that's part of your identity?

**Nicole:** Yeah, definitely. (interview, December 26, 2013)

This poet was brief, yet adamant, in her response.

Rafael answered by focusing more on the community than on himself. He said:

Well, yes and no. Like if someone asked me, "Do you do spoken word?" I'd be like, "Yeah." But if someone asked me what I do, I'd say, "I'm an artist." I guess I would consider myself a spoken word person, like someone who actually does spoken word and loves it. But spoken word is so much more than just the title "spoken word." It's a community. It's being a part of something bigger than yourself. So I would identify myself as a spoken word artist, but it's much more than that. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Rafael was careful to point out the importance of community. In addition, his poet identity seems to fall under his identity as an artist.

Stacey responded by saying, "I do see myself as a spoken word poet. Once I realized I had to say what I write, I started saying it more comfortably. It's a little bit of a struggle, but I said it better than I had before" (interview, January 18, 2014). This identity seems to be one Stacey is still growing into. Likewise, Shawna's identity as a spoken word poet still feels new to her. She said, "I do consider myself a spoken word poet now. Before I was just like, 'Yeah, I write poetry'" (interview, December 27, 2013).

As Wenger writes, “Learning is . . . the vehicle for the development and transformation of identities” (1998, p. 13). He adds, “participation goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities with specific people”; “it is a constituent of our identities. As such, participation is not something we turn on and off” (Wenger, 1998, p. 57). The adolescent members of YVR have identities as writers because they engage in meaningful writing through their involvement in YVR. Their participation in YVR has helped to shape who they are and how they see themselves.

### **Writing Future: “It’s something that I’m not going to give up for anyone”**

I asked the poets to talk about how they envision their writing futures. I wanted to get a sense of how important they think writing will be later on in their lives. Jasmine said she thought it would be very important because she wants to study spoken word poetry when she goes to college. Jorge believes he will still be a poet in future years, but he does not believe it will be the focus of his life the way it is for Mark and Gabriel. Nicole said she is probably going to be an English or education major when she goes to college, and she would like to teach spoken word and one day publish a book. Rafael also wants to be a teacher, either in history or English. He said writing would be very important in his future: “Especially since I’m going to try to be a teacher. I know I’m going to have more essays ahead of me, more late nights. And hopefully I don’t stop writing poetry. So I think writing in general is going to be in my life for the rest of my life. It’s something that I’m not going to give up for anyone. It’s something I hope I never have to give up” (interview, March 19, 2014). Shawna talked about becoming a teaching artist for a school—something she would prepare for by shadowing Gabriel soon. Stacey

wants to be a book editor. These six poets see writing as being important to them in the future.

This section examines poets' attitudes and perceptions about themselves as writers. In particular, the poets describe their writing histories, powerful experiences, and sponsors and role models. They discuss flow experiences, writing dislikes, and overcoming challenges. Finally they share their writing identities and how they see the place of writing in their lives in the future.

"An identity is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other. . . . Bringing the two together through the negotiating of meaning, we construct who we are," Wenger writes (1998, p. 151). In other words, "identity exists . . . in the constant work of negotiating the self" (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). The poets in this study reflect deeply on their craft, and they seem to have developed a strong sense of writing self.

### **Perceived Changes**

This section discusses changes that the poets attribute to their involvement in YVR. This section also shares the poets' ideas about the features of YVR that help writers improve at spoken word poetry.

#### **Writing-Related Changes: "My writing has changed a lot"**

##### *Poetic Devices*

The poets credit several writing-related changes to their participation in YVR,

including gaining skill with poetic devices. Jorge contrasted this learning to what he had learned in school:

I didn't learn anything [in school] until second semester when I started going to poetry [club]. It's like, if you don't practice it, you're not going to retain the information. I started going to poetry [club] and really practicing all this stuff about onomatopoeia. I was practicing similes, metaphors. I was able to better incorporate them into my writing. Something big [Mark] taught us was to show rather than tell, so that was a big helping point when filling out scholarships because they ask you, "Tell me about an experience when you helped somebody, and it paid off." And then that's like, if you're really able to not just tell them, but you're actually able to show them, like put them in the moment, I feel like that helped me a lot more with winning scholarships. (interview, December 22, 2013)

Jorge believes his use of poetic devices has improved, which helped him earn scholarships. He believes skills learned in YVR are transferable to other contexts.

Jasmine talked about metaphors. She said, "Well, my poetry has changed drastically because when I would first write poems, like they wouldn't have as many metaphors. They would have simple structure. [Now I] use metaphors constantly" (interview, March 22, 2014). Like Jasmine, Nicole uses metaphors more frequently, which helps with expressing herself. The poets also talked about how their use of humor, sarcasm, and rhyme has changed.

Rafael has reduced the amount of rhyme he uses in his poems. Although rhyming is encouraged in rap, it provides limitations in spoken word. As Nicole told him, "You'd

be so focused on the rhyme that you would lose track of the actual meaning of the words. Once you broke out of that, you just bloomed” (interview, March 22, 2014).

### *Topics and Depth*

Involvement in YVR has changed the topics they write about and has helped them achieve more depth. Their poems often address social issues. As Jorge wrote on his participant information sheet: “Through my involvement with [YVR] I have developed awareness for societal issues that I otherwise would have never known about. [YVR] has shown me that the world is bigger than I am. It has helped me grow emotionally, psychologically, and publicly as a young man who cares for his community.” Like Jorge, Rafael has started to tackle social issues in his poems.

Poets also talked about writing emotional pieces. Nicole said:

When I first joined, I was really big on my comedy. . . . And then after the BNV season, I started changing my poetry, and I wanted to start writing more emotional or narrative pieces, so then I switched my writing a little bit. That kind of helped me as a person to be able to express my emotions in a better way through doing poetry. And since I’ve been practicing that, my writing has changed a lot. (interview, March 22, 2014)

Rafael talked about how he is trying to branch out from political pieces and write emotional ones, too.

### *Organization and Conventions*

Another way spoken word has changed Jorge’s writing is by teaching him

organization. He said he is “able to process [his] thoughts better, organize them better” (interview, June 27, 2014). This is a change that others have noticed in him, too. For example, Mark talked about their revision sessions in Mark’s kitchen, where he would help Jorge move stanzas around and tighten up his poems. Mark said, “That level, that sophistication of writing, is something that [Jorge] fought for” (interview, June 24, 2014). Jorge also talked about how his grammar skills have improved and he better understands sentence breaks now. Nicole talked about learning editing skills through her involvement with YVR.

### **Personal Changes: “Our vulnerability does not make us weak”**

#### *Social Skills and Confidence*

The poets talked about how their social skills and confidence have improved as a result of their participation in YVR. Rafael said that he is more willing to talk to people. Jasmine believes that performing slam poetry has helped her connect with audiences. She has to make eye contact, which was previously a challenge. Nicole remarked on the changes she has witnessed in Jasmine: “When she first started doing spoken word poetry and stuff, she was really awkward, and she didn’t talk a lot to people. She was just kind of shy and like inward and more of an introvert. When she started doing spoken word poetry and like we started working on it together more, she started being more of an extrovert and being just more outward in general” (interview, July 21, 2014).

Jorge believes Stacey has become more social through her involvement in YVR. She started saying hello to him. Stacey agrees with this observation. She said:

Before going to [YVR], I was very anti-social. I really did not speak to



anyone. Like even now, it's hard for me to make eye contact or just, I don't know, it's really hard. And then I went to [YVR] and I [heard Mark say], "Okay, stand up and talk to random people." And I'm like, "Um no." And I sat down. My friends told me, "You need to go talk to people." And there's actually like people who talked to me, and I was just like, "Oh my gosh. How are they not embarrassed? How can they do this?" And after a while, like now, after going to slams, I actually am the one to tell my friends, "I want to talk to people." (interview, March 22, 2014)

Stacey also talked about how this has transferred to school. She reported raising her hand to speak more often, not being afraid to write, and not being afraid to share her writing with others or to say her words out loud.

Gabriel believes YVR has helped Nicole push through anxiety. He said of her:

[Nicole] had the worst anxiety in the world. You could tell that she was pushing herself because she was very uncomfortable reading. She would go really, really fast—she would shake—all these signs of major anxiety. And she stuck with it, you know, which is a testament to her. What I've noticed with the community and what [YVR] has done for her is allowed her to see herself as a voice and a person that matters. And that, I think, is what [Nicole] was really looking for. She was looking for space where she fit in, where she belonged, where she could become somebody. I see a lot of myself in [Nicole], a lot of the anxiety and the not fitting in. And she's grown so much. Like [Nicole] used to be terrified of trying to memorize a poem, you know? It was like her biggest fear. And now she can do it like

nothing. (interview, June 5, 2014)

Jasmine's confidence seems to have improved as well. Nicole said that Jasmine used to be nervous to perform, but now she does it as if it is not an issue at all. These findings are in line with Weinstein's (2010) notion that spoken word poetry can help writers increase their confidence and become less shy.

### *Leadership*

Many of the poets talked about gaining leadership skills through YVR. Gabriel commented on Jorge's development as a leader: "[Jorge] definitely became a better leader through [YVR]. He became a mentor for the younger kids" (interview, June 5, 2014). Gabriel also talked about Jasmine's development as a leader. He said of Jasmine: "Now, for me personally, [Jasmine is] the leader. She's one of the leaders. She's performing tonight at [a state humanities event] by herself. I'm not available. I was able to call [Jasmine], send her an email with the executive director's name and trust that she was going to be okay" (interview, June 5, 2014).

Mark talked about how some poets show leadership through the support they give to their peers. He said, "One of the really strong things about kids like [Jorge] and [Jasmine] . . . is they're super supportive of other kids. And that's like what we encourage, but they start to set a tone because they're natural leaders" (interview, June 24, 2014). Nicole has developed as a leader as well. Jasmine said of Nicole, YVR has "honed her ability to be a leader. Now she's looking for opportunities for where [she] can do this, where [she] can help with that" (interview, March 22, 2014). Rafael agreed, adding, "[Nicole] was always the president of poetry club. She kind of ran it from behind

the curtains, and now she's like, 'I'm here. This is what we're doing.' I guess poetry's really helped her to find her inner dictator" (interview, March 22, 2014). Jorge, Nicole, and Jasmine have all participated in the Brave New Voices competition. It is possible that it is the BNV experience that contributes to adolescents' development as leaders.

### *Empathy*

Some poets seem to develop empathy through their participation in YVR. Jorge discussed how poetry helped him see his stepfather in a new light. He said, "Yeah, it helped me definitely to develop a respect for my step dad, to understand what kind of person he is" (interview, June 27, 2014). It also helped him understand his biological father in a new way: "It helped me learn about how he was a good person and a bad person" (interview, June 27, 2014). Additionally, Jorge mentioned how poetry has helped him look at issues from multiple points of view: "I'm able to think differently. I'm able to look at different variables that affect a certain matter. So, you know, why does poverty in Africa exist? Okay, is it because of the politicians? Is it because of the people? How do the people feel about it? I'm able to . . . think about different factors and be really creative with the factors that I incorporate" (interview, June 27, 2014).

### *Healing*

According to the poets, YVR has also helped participants heal. Gabriel said of Shawna, "[Shawna] comes from . . . this sub-marginalized group of individuals. [Shawna] has had a very rough life in many ways. I've seen [her] begin the healing process . . . through her art" (interview, June 5, 2014). Mark said of Shawna:

I can look at someone like [Shawna] and know . . . how she's like risen above it, 'cause she's like hilarious and full of good energy, like witty. But I think writing and poetry [have] really led her to have more power to reflect about who she is. And that's the thing about writing. You are using this notion of semi-permanence to write who you are. And when you go back and read it, you can revise it. You can go, "Okay, who am I?" So when you come into that juncture, you come into that place, and the revision process of someone like [Shawna], you go, "Okay, well do you believe this, or do you want to believe this?" And then they, usually they choose the one that feels the best, you know. (interview, June 24, 2014)

Gabriel talked about Jorge's healing through poetry. He said, "[Jorge] has an interesting life. We all have interesting stories. [Jorge]'s father, his biological father, was murdered when [Jorge] was a baby, and [Jorge], his first series of poems really spoke to that. I remember [Jorge] crying one time on the mic, which I think was huge for him, you know, because he definitely needed to talk about something that was important" (interview, June 5, 2014).

### *Trust and Vulnerability*

Some poets also talked about developing trust and being open to vulnerability through participation in YVR. Nicole reflected on how she has changed:

My family's more of like a reserved family, so when I like first started getting into [YVR] and doing emotional pieces, it was really hard for me because I was like, "How do I connect with people? What is connecting

with people? How do I write something that's going to touch these people's hearts? Like how do I do that?" So when I first started learning about how to write a poem, one of the things [Mark] told me is that when you perform a poem you want to make eye contact with certain people in the crowd to pull more of the audience as a whole in. Just after having that on the stage, when I started having a relationship with people, I was actually able to be honest with how I felt and like now I'm actually really big on being honest because I'm always honest on paper, so why don't I be honest all of the time? It just made me be more true to who I am.

(interview, July 21, 2014)

Shawna has also become more open. Gabriel said, "I've seen [Shawna] become more trusting, a more loving individual through this community" (interview, June 5, 2014).

Mark said the group leaders' openness to being vulnerable is something that kids pick up on. He explained: "[Gabriel] and I . . . exhibit masculinity. I mean, we're men. We have beards and shit, whatever, but we're also vulnerable. And our vulnerability does not make us weak. I think [Rafael] observes that and is interested in it" (interview, June 24, 2014).

Conversely, Jasmine has become less comfortable with being vulnerable. On the participant information form, she wrote the following note at the end of the study: "I feel like my poetry right now is in a vulnerable stage. I am now giving my blood and sweat (literally and figuratively). I am giving what is left of me." Mark had this to add in an interview:

Sometimes [Jasmine] will like not share her poems. Actually, [Jasmine]'s

moved into this role where she shares less. Her first drafts, she doesn't share them that much in class. I think part of that is because she's already evolved into writing her own, that she doesn't feel like it's ready to be read. The other thing might be like she doesn't want to hear any of my comments on her work. Or she really isn't ready to speak. I don't know.

It's interesting. (interview, June 24, 2014)

This suggests that there may not be a linear trajectory toward openness, vulnerability, and trust in this group, but a recursive process of growing and questioning, growing and questioning. Participants may be more open—or less so—at different times.

### **Changes as Students: “It’s really helped me open up in class”**

The poets have experienced some changes that have carried over into school. Jorge talked about how YVR changed his attitude toward school. He said, “I wasn't much of a writer. I wasn't much of a reader. I was just another student in the school, you know. I wasn't really anybody. I didn't really have any goals. I was just there. And junior year, that's really when my life started to change, especially when I got into poetry” (interview, December 22, 2013). As Jorge continued on to college, he found that YVR had put him on a different level.

I can actually talk with the English teacher. I'm over here with a sincere interest in learning what she's saying, actually listening to the teacher, trying to connect her information, her advice, to a previous experience I've had with writing poetry and then in other classes as well. History class, you know, oh that's nice information, and I could incorporate that. I

could make a poem out of that. There's definitely a huge difference.

(interview, June 27, 2014)

Like Jorge, Rafael has also found that his involvement in spoken word has helped him at school. He explained:

I mean, it's really helped me open up in class. I used to not want to read passages, and I still don't, but if I get called on, it's not that big of a hassle for me anymore. I can read a passage without having an anxiety attack and running out of the classroom. I'm more comfortable going up to the board and doing math problems or presenting a presentation or reading my essay out loud to the class. So it helps you a lot. Especially in my English class, I've got to do peer-review where we talk one-on-one with a person, and even that can be a little stressful. So it really helps a lot with breaking out of your [comfort zone]. (interview, March 22, 2014)

YVR has helped Rafael participate more in school activities. On a related note, Stacey said that her grades have improved because she participates a lot more at school now. She explained that this is thanks to her experiences talking to new people and sharing her work at YVR events.

### **Features of YVR that Help Writers Improve at Poetry: “Don’t be afraid. Learn from this”**

Gabriel once told me that in YVR they try to create a space where kids will want to improve as writers. I asked Jorge if that is how he experiences it. He responded:

Yeah, exactly. They do that. They do create that sense of desire to

improve, but . . . they don't teach it to us with [textbook] definitions and examples. They just involve us, you know. They just make us do it. We do it. And when you just do it, that's when it happens. You're able to really learn it. You're able to soak in the information. It becomes second nature after a while" (interview, June 27, 2014).

This response is interesting because Jorge is highlighting how learning works in a community of practice. Learning happens through participation (Wenger, 1998).

Jorge described a time when the group leaders pushed him into a learning situation he was uncomfortable with. Mark invited him to be on the Brave New Voices team, but Jorge had only been in the group for three months. He was not sure if he could live up to his mentor's expectations:

[Mark] saw commitment. He saw potential, and I respect that. I appreciate that. I'm grateful. And he told me, "You're just going to grow from this experience, like you're going to just keep improving. Don't be afraid. Learn from this. You have one solid poem." He's like, "Writing is 99% hard work, 1% talent. And I just shut up. I didn't have anything to say to that. But what's important for helping teenagers improve? It's just practice. It's that hard work, that you commit to writing every day. That's what really improves a writer, you know. It's just practice, practice, practice, practice. (interview, June 27, 2014)

When I asked Stacey about the features of YVR that help kids improve at spoken word poetry, she talked about "the encouragement that they have there." She explained, "Nothing you write is ever wrong. It's just how you feel. We have that freedom of



speech, so we can use it” (interview, March 22, 2014). The environment YVR creates supports learning.

This section shares poets’ ideas about how their involvement in YVR has changed them. Wenger writes, “Learning transforms who we are and what we can do” (1998, p. 215). It changes us. As the poets in this study demonstrate, writing and performing spoken word poetry can change not only one’s writing but also oneself. The poets talked about becoming more confident, developing leadership skills, and becoming more open and vulnerable. They have also learned empathy and have healed through poetry. These writers believe that their time spent in YVR has helped them become more adept with poetic devices, and their writing has developed more depth. “Learning—whatever form it takes—changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 226). Participating in YVR seems to have changed these young writers in positive ways.

## **Conclusion**

We can better understand participation in Young Voices Rise through the perspectives of six adolescent members of the group, Jorge, Nicole, Jasmine, Rafael, Stacey, and Shawna. Their poems reveal the type of writing they do in the group, and their commentaries on these poems give a glimpse into their thought processes about these works. This chapter also examines the writing practices of all six of these poets, and while their practices may vary slightly, there are many similarities. Examining these practices leads to questions about how writing instruction might be designed to better

match the practices that writers choose on their own time.

By looking at these writers' attitudes about their writing lives, we can see their writing identities taking shape. These are poets who seem to experience flow states, overcome writing challenges, and see writing as important in the future. Each poet seems to have a strong sense of writing self. Recall that this group of participants includes a student who failed freshman English and another student who dropped out of high school, yet all six of these poets are strengthening their literate lives through their participation in YVR. Belonging to YVR seems to change these poets in multiple ways.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS

This study has much to offer secondary English language arts. Specifically, it recommends that teachers create safe spaces for storytelling, use the medium of spoken word poetry for a range of topics and purposes, attend to writers' multiple practices and preferences, support spoken word poetry on school campuses, and encouraging authentic participation and identity exploration. Because the voices of students are often missing from conversations about school reform, this chapter closes with advice from the adolescent poets about how to improve schools.

#### **Creating a Safe Space for Storytelling**

Mark and Gabriel have established a safe space for storytelling. They engage in the “work of ‘community maintenance’ [that is] an intrinsic part of any practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 74). One way they do this is by constantly reminding participants that they are in a safe space. They also build a sense of community by encouraging everyone to participate. They participate, too, sharing their own poems and embracing emotional vulnerability in front of students. Young Voices Rise (YVR) workshops are governed by three rules: (1) Be brave, (2) Be respectful, and (3) Your voice matters. These rules are essential for creating a space in which poets feel comfortable sharing their work with each other. Mark and Gabriel also encourage frequent low-risk sharing in these workshops. When poets do share, very little critique, if any, will be given. They try to get students to be brave and speak up because so many of them have had negative

experiences with writing or poetry somewhere along the line, typically in an English class. The teaching artists emphasize that all of the participants' voices matter and that poetry belongs to them regardless of where they come from. Overall, there is a lot of positive reinforcement, support, advice, and mentoring in this group.

English language arts teachers could use YVR's techniques to establish and maintain a safe space for storytelling in their classrooms. Teacher educators can prepare pre-service teachers for this task by modeling a safe space in the college classroom. Furthermore, they could use spoken word poetry and poetry slams in writing methods courses.

Gabriel talked about how to create a safe space for storytelling. He said, "I think the most important part of a safe space is the emotional literacy aspect. It's that once you get people to be able to express their own emotions and also get them to understand the importance of somebody else's emotions, this . . . becomes a space where people are not afraid to learn" (interview, June 5, 2014). Mark told me, "The standard first and foremost is the student, is the personal journey. So at large, we are not approaching young people as if they're lacking" (interview, June 24, 2014). In other words, they value young people's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

YVR emphasizes connections with students and the development of emotional literacy. Mark and Gabriel made me think about how easy it is for teachers to get caught up in curriculum and dismiss the personal side of education. As we know from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, feeling safe is an essential need (Lester et al., 1983). Ruday (2011) found when an "atmosphere of acceptance" was established in a writing workshop, it "helped the focal students feel comfortable at the program, enabled them to take risks,

and resulted in them taking themselves seriously as writers” (p. 191).

Some people may doubt whether it is possible to create a classroom space that feels as safe as that of YVR. After all, the kids who attend YVR functions are there voluntarily. Is it fair to compare school, a compulsory setting, with YVR, a voluntary one? I admit that these are two different worlds; however, this spoken word poetry group should inspire teachers to reflect on their own classrooms. Teachers might ask themselves questions like these: “How can I build more community in this class?” “How can I help students feel more confident about sharing their work?” “How can I help students respect the diverse experiences of their classmates?” These are important questions.

### **Using Spoken Word Poetry for a Range of Topics and Purposes**

Young people use out-of-school writing in ways that are meaningful to them. In a study of spoken word poets and songwriters in Vancouver, Lauscher (2007) found that participants used writing as “a context for identity construction,” “an emotional outlet and a ‘safe place,’” a way to ‘be heard,’” “a means of connecting with and understanding others,” and “a context for learning and teaching” (p. 102).

Spoken word poetry can be used to discuss a range of topics and to help authors achieve multiple purposes. The poets in this study tended to use spoken word to either speak out about social issues or to revisit personal experiences. Rafael and Jorge both use poetry to address issues like racial discrimination and corruption in government. These poets can give teachers a glimpse of how poetry might be used alongside historical study in the secondary classroom. Students could conduct research and take a stand, speaking out about topics and issues that they care about. As Freire writes, “Who are better

prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (1993, p. 45). Spoken word poetry can be used to help students recognize the injustices that they and others in their communities experience on a daily basis.

Teachers could work with students to help them develop critical literacy skills by showing examples of critical spoken word performances, discussing issues in more depth, asking students to research issues of concern to them, and helping them write poems of their own. In YVR, the adult teaching artists are important role models who expand listeners’ awareness of social issues. In the secondary classroom, the teacher of spoken word poetry should write beside the students and perform as well.

Jasmine and Nicole both show how poetic language is valued in contemporary performance poetry. They reveal how figurative devices gleaned from English courses can be applied to a form of writing that they enjoy. These writers can help us see the potential of spoken word poetry in the classroom for complementing more traditional forms of poetry study or as a unit of study on its own. Nicole uses extended metaphors and repetition in creative ways, and Jasmine has interesting turns of phrase. Teachers could help students apply traditional devices to newer forms. Teachers might even ask students to take one form of writing and turn it into a spoken word poem, as Nicole did with an essay she wrote for her English class:

What I did was copy the essay, paste it into my poetry folder, and then I just typed it into stanzas and made it into lines. And then I just kind of changed up the words because in the poetry you don’t need a lot of “ands” and all those extra words. So I took out a lot of those words. In our class there were different appeals that we had to use in the essay, so I had

[reading from paper] overstatement, sentimental appeal, hasty generalization, dogmatism, false dichotomy, equivocation, scare tactics, bandwagon, red herring, and faulty reasoning. So, in our essay, we were allowed to write about whatever we want, so I just picked “people who interrupt people,” and I wrote the essay. Then I rearranged everything and turned it into the poem. (interview, December 26, 2013)

It is easy to set up a false dichotomy of in-school and out-of-school learning. Sometimes out-of-school writing began in a classroom or vice versa.

Shawna and Stacey show us how poetry can be used for self-expression and reflection. Through spoken word, they make sense of their experiences and take control of their lives. They are able to share their poems with authentic audiences in safe spaces. These poets can help us see how writing can be used for healing and other personally meaningful purposes. Dutro (2011) suggests that teachers need to be open to the sharing of wounds in classrooms. Making room in the English language arts classroom for this type of writing can help students grow. It would represent a shift toward teaching the whole student.

As these poets demonstrate, through the writing and performance of spoken word poetry, young people can experience the relevance of poetry, learn more about important issues, and stand up for what they believe in. Spoken word poetry can be used across the disciplines to creatively and effectively present ideas. This medium allows for an embodied learning experience because performance is incorporated as well.

Teachers should incorporate writing that can be used by students for a range of purposes, and the medium of spoken word poetry is flexible in this way. Too often

teachers dictate the design of an assignment rather than letting students learn through the design process, choosing the forms and modes that best serve their goals (Williams, 2014). Teacher educators can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to use writing for a range of purposes. Future English teachers will need to know how to balance the demands of meeting standards with also making sure students write for their own purposes.

### **Attending to Writers' Multiple Practices and Preferences**

The six young spoken word poets in this study have distinct writing practices and preferences, which do not always match how writing is taught in schools. For example, Rafael talked about how he likes to walk up and down the hallways of his home and freestyle, talking into a voice recorder on his phone. Jasmine mentioned that she likes to make lists before writing poems. Nicole types into her phone while she is riding on a city bus. These poets tend to write at night, and they prefer to write alone.

Schools may not be able to accommodate the many different practices and preferences that writers have. However, teachers could build some flexibility into their teaching of writing, especially with pre-writing strategies. They might also be able to let students spread out on an area of campus to write or even to make voice memos on their phones. Perhaps one of the key implications of this study in terms of writing instruction is to build choice into assignments—at as many of the different writing stages as possible. Additionally, students need caring teachers who will give them a chance to explore the personal topics they care about (Potter, McCormick, & Busching, 2001).

Teachers should try to learn about students' writing practices and preferences to



let them know they are taken seriously as writers. Also, learning about literacy in multiple contexts can expand teachers' understandings of adolescent literacies. Within teacher education programs, pre-service teachers could be asked to venture into youth writing communities to see what is happening there. Alternatively, pre-service teachers might interview or survey secondary students to learn about their writing practices and preferences. These perspectives can inform their teaching of formal literacies.

### **Supporting Spoken Word Poetry on School Campuses**

Youth spoken word poetry groups exist all over the United States. This form of writing seems to be gaining popularity all the time. Teachers and administrators may be interested in bringing spoken word poetry into their schools, and there are various ways to do that. In the classroom, spoken word poetry could be used as a unit of study or to complement other literature or even other topics under discussion. The sections below provide some suggestions regarding poetry workshops, poetry slams, and poetry clubs. These areas present opportunities for creating third spaces (Gutierrez, 2008) where students can bridge formal academic literacy learning with knowledge from their out-of-school lives.

#### **Poetry Workshops**

YVR poetry workshops tend to follow a basic pattern. Members quickly introduce themselves to the rest of the group. The rest of the workshop consists of one or two writing activities. If a model poem is used in a workshop, group leaders and participants break it down together until the language and the ideas of the poem are clear. These

model poems also typically serve as springboards for writing activities. Mark refers to these exercises as “structured prompts” and explains they are “super aligned to the poem, where it’s almost a worksheet” (interview, June 24, 2014). The opening narrative in Chapter 1 contains an example of this type of exercise. Participants looked at a poem that used vivid details and sarcasm and wrote poems of their own. In another workshop, Mark read the poem “Abandoned Farmhouse” by Ted Kooser, and then he had the writers compose poems about abandoned spaces. Mark and Gabriel always set aside plenty of time for sharing in these workshops.

I would recommend that teachers interested in using poetry workshops in the English language arts classroom read the article, “Finding the Poetic High: Building a Spoken Word Poetry Community and Culture of Creative, Caring, and Critical Intellectuals,” by Gerald T. Reyes (2006). Reyes discusses considerations regarding the physical space, workshop activities, and respecting writers. Additionally, Weiss and Herndon (2001) have developed a five-week workshop for using spoken word poetry in the English language arts classroom. Jocson (2008) provides descriptions of the weekly topics used in a Poetry for the People program (e.g., profiling, home), a multi-media list of resources for the classroom, and student handouts for poetry-writing workshops.

Using spoken word poetry in the English language arts classroom can help teachers meet a variety of reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening standards in the *Common Core State Standards* (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2014) for grades 6 through 12. For example, students can analyze text structure or point of view in spoken word poems, examine an author’s use of figurative language or nuances in language, interpret texts in different formats and media, and use research in

writing.

The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011) argues that students will need a variety of skills to succeed in the writing they will do in their lives after high school. Spoken word poetry can be used to support all of the habits of mind suggested in this document, including curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Additionally, spoken word can help students gain valuable experiences thinking critically, writing for different audiences, and working through various aspects of the writing process.

### **Poetry Slams**

Hosting a poetry slam can be a rewarding experience. The main guideline for a poetry slam is that it should be entertaining. The host interacts with the audience, demonstrating how to give love and energy to the poets through snaps, claps, and comments. A deejay plays music in between the poems, and, in fact, a really good deejay listens to the poem and chooses a song to play afterwards that builds off the conversation initiated by the poet. Audience members can clap along to a song or even get up and dance. Judges score poems on a 0-10 scale (going out to one decimal place), and then the audience responds to these scores with cheers or boos. By the way, at a YVR slam, it is never acceptable to boo a poet. In the time I have spent with them, I have never seen an audience member act disrespectfully toward a poet. As the event concludes, the host announces the winners of the slam, stressing that the scores do not really matter. The host also encourages audience members to meet someone new after the slam. These practices

contribute to a safe, fun, and welcoming event.

Gallagher (2006) suggests, “One reason students don’t write well is that they do not care what they are writing about. If you think about it, we often ask students to do the kind of writing that we, as adults, *never* do” (p. 90, emphasis in original). In the case of a poetry slam, students are writing for an authentic audience. They know their voices and their stories will be heard. In the nine years I taught at the secondary level, I found that the writing students prepared for performance was some of the best they wrote in my class. Students are excited to share their work beyond an audience of one.

As a teacher educator, I have used a poetry slam in my Methods of Teaching English Language course at Arizona State University. I kicked off the unit by performing a poem I wrote (see the Afterward), which did a lot for paving the way for the types of poems they then shared during our poetry slam on the last night of class. On a related note, Winn and Ubiles (2011) have written about using poetry writing and sharing in teacher education. In their “worthy witnessing” workshops, they have guided pre-service teachers in discussing early memories of literacy, mapping their communities, and sharing their poems (p. 305). Teacher educators can use many techniques to make spoken word accessible to pre-service teachers.

### **Poetry Clubs**

YVR is more than a community of practice that meets monthly at a public library. It is a “constellation” (Wenger, 1998), a vast network that extends across multiple cities and school districts, made up of multiple communities of practice that mostly consist of school poetry clubs. Wenger explains that a constellation can involve “sharing historical

roots, having related enterprises, serving a cause or belonging to an institution, facing similar conditions, having members in common, sharing artifacts, having geographical relations of proximity or interaction, having overlapping styles or discourses, [and] competing for the same resources” (1998, p. 127). Although YVR’s work in schools falls outside of the scope of this study, the adolescent poets were adamant about the importance of these clubs for introducing them to spoken word and then nurturing their growth as poets. Recall that Rafael, Nicole, and Jasmine attend the same poetry club; also, Jorge attended a poetry club at another school in the same district.

Gabriel compared the Saturday events with the work YVR does in schools. He said of the Saturday events, “[YVR] is so much more than just the [events at the library], but [these events are] important. It’s the foundation of the community. It’s a place for them all to come congregate. And that’s what’s really important about it is it is diverse. You got all these different kids and different communities coming together to formalize one community” (interview, June 5, 2014). On the other hand, he said that their work in schools makes up the bulk of their work: “Really our major focus is our residency programs. The slam is a monthly event, but on a weekly and daily basis we are in about 10 different schools consistently, developing new workshops, new programs” (interview, June 5, 2014).

At these YVR-affiliated poetry clubs, a teaching artist will come in weekly and lead the group through writing activities. If the group is preparing for an event, the artist may be there even more. Mark said that each school club should also plan an event:

At [one school] they had a huge slam for the school. So they read their poems, and there were like hundreds of kids in the audience. It was great.

[At another school] we did the first ever [YVR] play with kids. It was awesome. And we collaborated with the step team, the dancers, musicians on campus. Each program should have its own personal culminating event at the end of each semester. So whether that's a play or a slam or they do a trip to the homeless shelter to perform. That's pretty much the idea of each of the programs. (interview, June 24, 2014)

These events connect club members to larger audiences. Different groups from around campus may work together to stage the event. Also, friends, family members, and teachers can come and appreciate the work that these students are doing. Club events might also reach into the community in helpful ways.

Rafael said that the feedback process for poems works differently in clubs, and they have a specific mentor they work with:

At our school there's a poetry club. There's about 15 of us. And [Mark] is the main guy who comes in. He's like the team's mentor. But he has that one-to-one approach. We'll do a workshop, we'll read it, and like he'll ask for volunteers to read. And if I read, he'll directly look at me, tell me one-on-one what the strengths are and what the weaknesses are. I read a message poem. It was a minority in the 1950's speaking to a police officer, and he told me to research a lot about it to have the facts straight because it's a strong poem, and it would be even stronger with facts. He's the type of mentor that kind of like calls you on your stuff but also gives you feedback. He's a very strong person. (interview, March 19, 2014)

It sounds as if the feedback Rafael receives at the poetry club at his high school is much

more detailed than the feedback he receives at Saturday events at the library. At the high school, he has an assigned mentor, who will tell him what is good about the poem and what still needs work.

Jorge talked about what makes the school poetry clubs special:

That's where the magic happens, the main basis of learning. Because on Saturdays, that's, one, a public event, and, two, it's more of a showcase/get-together, kind of event. Whereas in the school, it's more of a practice, more of a harnessing [of] newly developed skills. And I believe one of the most beautiful things that [YVR] does is it connects students that otherwise never would have known each other, would have never met, would have never had something in common. And in that classroom where they practice and train is where the relationships are really being strengthened, you know. . . . It's in the classroom where they tell the other students, "Look, I'm your friend. I'm here for you." And at the Saturday event is where the results of that appear, you know, the results of all that friendship strengthening. That's one of the more beautiful things that I've seen. [YVR] creates that sense of community. And I mean, on Saturdays, it does as well because of the, "What time is it," or those little things that they do. That stuff definitely helps create a sense of community, but not like the sense of community it creates in the classroom. (interview, June 27, 2014)

The sense of community at Saturday events is very strong, but Jorge suggests the community within his high school poetry club was even stronger. He sees the Saturday

events as a time to present polished work, while all of the hard work leading up to those events happens in the poetry clubs on high school campuses.

Teachers and students could create poetry clubs on their campuses using some of the ideas above. Specifically, the group might meet once a week. Time could be allotted for writing and feedback. Local teaching artists might visit and offer their expertise to the group. Also, the poetry club could hold culminating events on campus. More work remains to be done on spoken word poetry clubs at high schools in the urban Southwest. I am currently conducting a follow-up study of a YVR-affiliated high school poetry club to learn more about its practices.

### **Encouraging Authentic Participation and Identity Exploration**

This study explores how literacy learning happens in a community of practice, offering useful suggestions for rethinking how learning happens in schools. As Wenger (1998) writes, “What does look promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value” (p. 10).

One of the problems with school learning—in my experience as a student, teacher, teacher educator, and literacy researcher—is that it provides little opportunity for students to identify with the work they do. “If school practices become self-contained then they cease to point anywhere beyond themselves. School learning is just learning school” (Wenger, 1998, p. 267). However, in a community of practice, learning happens



through participation in meaningful activities, and identities form out of this engagement. Jorge compared learning in YVR to learning in an English class in school. He said, “[In the club] I could actually claim to be a writer. ‘I wrote two poems, you guys. I’m a writer.’ Whereas, you know, if I never would have done that, I would have just been like, ‘Yeah, I wrote three English papers, but nobody read them other than the teacher. Nobody cares’” (interview, June 27, 2014).

Wenger writes, “An excessive emphasis on formalism without corresponding levels of participation . . . can easily result in an experience of meaninglessness” (1998, p. 67). It may even be that ignoring the role of identity in learning is a social injustice: “Focusing on an institutionalized curriculum . . . runs the risk of serving those who already have an identity of participation with respect to the material in other contexts” (Wenger, 1998, p. 269). It is essential that we structure English language arts courses so students can actively participate and meaningfully engage with material. Also, encouraging students to reflect on their writing identities can impact the writing they do (Worthington, 2008). Young people, especially, need to see that their writing and their voices matter. Students need opportunities to practice authentic writing for real audiences. They deserve opportunities to identify with forms of writing that offer personal satisfaction and even potential careers. “Students must be enabled to explore who they are, who they are not, [and] who they could be. They must be able to understand where they come from and where they can go” (Wenger, 1998, p. 272).

### **The Poets’ Suggestions for Schools**

I asked the adolescent poets to provide suggestions for improving schools and, in

particular, secondary English language arts classes.

Rafael said he would like to see modern poetry and political speeches incorporated into the English classroom. He also said he would like to see more choice:

Well, a lot of school right now is routine. You know, you go into class, you pick a topic, you write an essay, you turn it in, you pick another topic, you write another essay, [and] you turn it in. So I guess it's breaking that habit that kids are programmed to have like, "Well, I need a good grade on this, so I have to research for two hours every night, write an essay." So just breaking that habit, like a twist on it, you know. (interview, March 19, 2014)

Rafael also would like for students to be able to choose their reading from a particular era, rather than having to read the same text like *Frankenstein* or a Shakespeare play. In addition, he would like to see library days where students could choose a book and spend the class reading.

Jorge said he would like teachers to explain the purpose of assignments. In other words, how does this assignment help students in life? Or how can students form personal connections to this work? While Jorge acknowledged the value of structured papers, he thinks creative projects should be incorporated into English curriculum. He would like to see fewer boundaries and more choice. Additionally, Jorge thinks teachers should focus more on building community in the classroom.

Stacey would like to see poetry clubs at schools. In fact, she mentioned there should be multiple reading and writing clubs on campus. She also said that sometimes students should be able to write without worrying about it being perfect.

Shawna said she disliked formulaic essays. She also was dissatisfied with her school's attempt at a poetry club. Instead, she would have preferred a club like those affiliated with YVR. Attending the Town Slam made her realize how much she would have appreciated a spoken word poetry club in high school: "I was watching all the schools go up there. I was like, 'Man, I would have totally been all over this if I would have known that it was allowed at high school.' Like if this was something that we could take, you know. Man, I would have been all over it. It's crazy" (interview, December 27, 2013).

Nicole said she would have liked more exposure to literature in school. The reading they did in class was too narrow, and they were not asked to read enough books. Also, Nicole and I had the following exchange about poetry:

**Wendy:** What can schools do to better support writers like you?

**Nicole:** Put it in their curriculum! Like, please! Put in a poetry unit here and there. It's not just about Shakespeare or like, I love classic poetry and stuff, but I think they should like put different forms and, I don't know.

**Wendy:** And modernize it?

**Nicole:** Yeah. You understand. (interview, July 21, 2014)

Nicole wants to see a more diversified curriculum that includes modern works, including spoken word poems. She values more traditional literature, but she also believes kids will connect with spoken word poetry.

Jasmine explained how her school experiences were different because of the spoken word poetry club on their campus. She said, "In our school we've actually been kind of blessed because we really don't have to go through so much struggle. We have

English teachers who are so involved with our poetry that they'll ask if we've written anything new. We have a dedicated poetry club" (interview, July 21, 2014). At their school, Jasmine and Nicole have even been invited into classrooms to perform and to teach spoken word poetry lessons to their peers.

### **Conclusion**

Spoken word poetry has helped the adolescents in this study develop as writers and as people. Participating in a community of practice offers them a safe space to enact writer identities as they express themselves. These adolescent poets have developed distinct writing practices, and they thoughtfully reflect on their writing lives. Young Voices Rise, the poetry organization that supports them, has its own distinguishing characteristics and practices. Members can participate in this group in a variety of ways, and the poems they produce are often insightful and sophisticated. Examining this community of practice reveals how writers act when they genuinely care about and identify with the writing they produce.

Given all of these benefits, it follows that the literacy work that is happening every day because of teaching artists like Mark and Gabriel needs to be properly funded. Groups like theirs are especially vital when they also operate in parts of the country where we see racial profiling, discrimination against those who are LGBT, and hostility toward ethnic studies. When literacy organizations like YVR remain largely unfunded, the danger is they will fade out. The mic will go silent. We have a responsibility to prevent that from happening. After all, the silencing of voices of urban youth would be a terrible injustice.

## CHAPTER 7

### AFTERWARD

***“You don’t die. It feels like you’re going to die, but then afterwards you’re like,***

***‘Oh my god. I’m still alive, and that was amazing! When can I do it again?’”***

*- Gabriel on slamming for the first time (observation, July 19, 2014)*

When I began this study, I did not have any personal experience using spoken word poetry as a medium, and I doubted ever being able to learn it. As I attended YVR events throughout the 2013-2014 season, I managed to scrawl down two ideas for poems: “My mom is in a jar somewhere in my dad’s house” and “For the poets baring their souls, what do I have to give you?” I suppose I realized that the most upsetting experience I had lived through was the death of my mother (hence the jar for ashes). The second line revealed the guilt I was feeling because the poets were sharing their stories, and it seemed wrong to not give them back a story in return. Repeatedly I tried to expand on these poetry kernels, but I concluded I was simply not a spoken word poet. However, something changed when I interviewed Gabriel in June 2014. He said that my presence mattered to the poets, and this validation gave me inspiration and confidence. Twelve days later, I sat down and wrote my poem in just two hours.

My mother died two and a half years before I wrote the piece, and I thought I had finished grieving. As the tears streamed down my face while writing, I discovered I was still carrying a lot of pain, even after all that time. Paradoxically, revisiting the most upsetting memories was cathartic. By the time I put my pen down, I felt like something

heavy I was carrying was gone.

Over the weeks that followed, I read through the poem out loud again and again, adjusting the words, and I would get choked up on the most painful line of the poem: “I was in the room when her breath stopped.” That memory was horrible for me. I imagined someday performing the poem, breaking down, and being unable to continue. Eventually, I did read the poem out loud to someone, but it was actually another line that gave me pause. Still, getting through my first reading of the poem in front of someone made me feel stronger. In fact, each reading became easier than the one before it. Not only was I mastering the lines, but I was also mastering the memory. This might explain why young people are drawn to spoken word; they can use it to face any problems they have.

The kickoff YVR event of the 2014-2015 season, a workshop and slam to be held on September 20, 2014, was announced through Facebook. As the event neared, I practiced my poem with more focus. I decided not to memorize the piece because I knew I would get nervous and forget the whole thing. Instead, I would take my poem up to the microphone like many of the youth poets in the group do.

At the beginning of the slam, Gabriel made the following announcement:

We also have a couple of adults who are going to read poems. One of them is Ms. Wendy Williams. Everybody say hello. For those of you who do not know, Wendy is a doctoral student at Arizona State University and she has kindly selected [YVR] to do all of her research on. And through this process, she is not just coming as an outsider like looking in and doing research. She has become a part of the family. A lot of you guys know Wendy. And Wendy wrote a poem about her experience, and it's so

beautiful because she's nervous. And that's what's really dope about it,  
that she's like, "I'm nervous to read that poem." And that's the point.  
That's what this is, right? You're nervous, you get up, you share your  
story, and that's beautiful. So I'm excited. All right. Cool.

(observation, September 20, 2014)

The crowd cheered as I approached the stage. I hoped I would not let them down. I took a  
deep breath and launched into my poem:

A Poem for the Poets (performance version, September 20, 2014)

Poets, you have faced fear head-on,  
Cut out tumors, brought them out into the light, and turned them over in your hands,  
examining them.  
Like philosophers, you have contemplated their meaning.  
I have watched you banish demons like priests,  
heal wounds like miracle workers,  
forgive like saints,  
and rally for change as activists.  
Poets, you have schooled this teacher,  
had this researcher investigate herself.  
And now I stand before you, at your altar, ready to shed my blood.  
I present my mom to you.  
In a jar.  
She sits on a shelf at my dad's house.

My mother lived in the desert back when crop dust fell from the sky.  
Next to fields, the cupboards of her home were hungry.  
Memories of an abusive father rattled the girl even into adulthood.  
But my mother grew up to be joyful and kind.  
And I have heard stories about her singing in bars in Spanish.  
(She didn't know Spanish.)  
And I remember the way she approached big bearded bikers in Ziggy's Music and asked  
for the stories behind their tattoos. And they smiled and told her everything.  
Those memories—all her memories—are now on the shelf.  
Ashes of mystery.  
Thousands of stories locked away forever.  
For 20 years my mom died of cancer.  
With each tumor removed, two more would appear. It was a losing battle.  
She grew thinner, more confused.  
I spent many hours with her at the end, when she was delirious about a crooked car  
salesman stealing a novel she had never written.  
I didn't want to remember her like that,  
My poor sweet mother who built a safe, happy home for two girls and a husband who did  
not hit us, or drink, or cheat on her. She broke the cycle.  
She was a homeroom mother.  
And she packed little notes in my lunches and made shapes out of the sandwiches.  
When her cancer came, I was a teenager.  
My world did not just stop. Planets paused mid-rotation. The universe held its breath in a



20-year gasp.

And when she died, I no longer had to be afraid of the phone ringing because the worst thing that could happen had already happened.

I was in the room when her breath stopped.

Two men in suits collected her.

They put on latex gloves and hoisted her into one of two vans making nightly pickup rounds.

I wondered how many bodies were piled inside.

Life is precious. Limited. Fleeting.

We encapsulate stories.

We are vessels transporting volumes.

Poets, you have helped me shake the dust off this 38-year-old body and speak, embracing the vulnerability that comes with honesty, ready to rise from the ashes in a blaze like a phoenix. Thank you.

And for the record, poets, I see you.

This

isn't about the search for the perfect word or extended metaphor.

Listener by listener, you are changing lives.

Line by line, you are re-writing a world in desperate need of revision. Thank you.

Halfway through the piece, my paper was shaking in my hands. I did not feel particularly nervous standing up there. It was more like I was full of energy, excited. My voice was steady throughout, and I had control over the lines. I delivered them with the

volume and emphasis I had practiced at home. So why were my knees shaking by the end of the poem? This experience made me think about Stacey performing with her paper shaking. Maybe I had been witnessing something besides fear in her performances. Energy? Adrenaline? Perhaps I had been too quick to judge.

Back at the microphone, Gabriel said:

Give it up for Wendy. [The crowd cheered.] We always say it. The point is the poetry not the score; the point is the community. And that, shit, that was dope. What was that last line? I was like, “What? She’s been researching! ‘The world needs revision.’” Yes. Definitely. Thank you so much. We really appreciate you, and we appreciate you coming up here and sharing. (observation, September 20, 2014)

After the slam, Stacey and Jasmine said they saw my paper shaking, which is fine by me. Understanding the vulnerability of being up on stage and exposing one’s soul to a room full of audience members requires experiencing that sensation firsthand.

This experience helped me to better understand how participation in YVR works, resulting in the following four conclusions: (1) Feeling a sense of belonging increased my writing confidence and inspired ideas. (2) The process of composing a spoken word poem helped me to work through a painful experience. (3) Knowing that there was an authentic audience to hear my words encouraged me to invest time in the piece. (4) I had internalized group practices and attitudes as a mere observer. For example, YVR taught me how to gesture and how to vary my voice, changing the volume and pace for expression and emphasis. They also taught me to weave together two ideas (i.e., the poets’ storytelling and my mom’s death) without explicitly teaching me that. Ten days

after I wrote my poem, Jorge said in an interview, “[Spoken word poetry] jumps. The topics [jump], but there’s a . . . definite relationship established between one topic [and] the other. It’s just a matter of how you connect those dots. Without ever listening or going or attending on a regular basis, you won’t understand connections. Even though there is no structure, there is” (interview, June 27, 2014). Strangely enough, the two ideas were the kernels I had worked out months before I sat down to write my poem.

As a researcher in this space—and someone much too old to be a member of this youth group—I did not expect to absorb so much about writing and performing spoken word poetry simply by being near the group over one season. Lave and Wenger (1991) write, “Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and . . . the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (p. 29).

I would not have said that I was engaged in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) throughout the study. Rather, I was a transactional participant (Wenger & Trayner, 2011), working even beyond the periphery that is an access point for many newcomers. What is interesting to me is that resting far on the outskirts of this group—even beyond the realm of legitimate peripheral participation—for so long had prepared me to move into deeper participation later. I learned spoken word poetry writing and performance techniques from observing YVR, and my time with them also changed my attitude—specifically, they showed me that embracing vulnerability is a beautiful thing. It seems that throughout this yearlong study, I was engaged in a type of apprenticeship that I was not consciously aware of, learning by listening to the poets.

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APPENDIX A  
DATA COLLECTION

## **Group Leader Interview**

### **Background Information**

1. Tell me about yourself.
  - What drew you to spoken word poetry?
  - Were you a good writer in school?
2. What does it take to be a great spoken word poet?

### **Group Characteristics and Practices**

3. How did this spoken word poetry group come about?
  - When?
  - Why?
  - What is the mission?
4. How is the group organized?
  - Who runs it?
  - What happens on a typical day? Over the course of a year?
5. How does the writing process happen in this group?
6. Compare learning in this spoken word poetry group to learning in school. How is it the same or different?
  - What should schools learn from this group?
7. Talk to me about leading this group.
  - What do you like about it?
  - What do you hope to achieve?

### **Changes Attributed to Participation in the Group**

8. What features of this group help adolescents improve at spoken word poetry?
  9. Recall a time when you observed an adolescent member struggling in the group. How did you help that person?
  10. Tell me about the changes you have witnessed in (\_\_\_) as a result of his/her participation in this group. (Go through adolescent participants one at a time.)
  11. Does the group help adolescent members with anything other than writing?
  12. Think of a powerful experience you have had yourself, or witnessed, during your time in this group. What happened?
- \* Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this spoken word poetry group?
- \* (Follow-up questions from data analysis, if necessary.)

## **Adolescent Interview #1: “A Writing Life: Past / Present / Future”**

### **How Adolescents View Themselves and Their Writing**

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. I want you to reflect on how you became the writer you are today. Tell me about your writing history.
  - Have you ever been a different kind of writer than a spoken word poet? Explain.
3. How do you feel about yourself as a writer?
  - Is being a spoken word poet part of your identity?
4. What motivates you to write spoken word poetry?
5. Who are your writing role models?
6. Who in your life has supported or nurtured your writing? They don't have to be writers themselves.
7. Does school support the things you like about writing?
8. Think back to a time when you were faced with a writing challenge. What happened and how did you work through it?
9. Next, I have eight short questions that deal with your writing practices and preferences:
  - When do you write?
  - How often?
  - Where?
  - With whom?
  - With what tools?
  - On what topics?
  - In what forms?
  - Any writing dislikes?
10. Do you ever lose track of time when you are writing? Explain.
11. How important do you think writing will be in your future? Explain.

### **Changes Attributed to Participation in the Group**

12. What has been the most powerful experience you have had in your spoken word poetry group? Tell me the story.
- \* Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your writing past, present, or future?
- \* (Follow-up questions from data analysis, as needed.)

## **Adolescent Interview #2: “Belonging to a Spoken Word Poetry Group”**

### **Group Characteristics and Practices**

1. Tell me about [this spoken word poetry group]. What is it?
  - What do you do in [the group]?
  - What does it mean to be a member?
  - What are [the group’s] goals?
2. Talk about how [the group] is organized.
  - What happens when the group meets? Over the course of a year?
3. Compare learning in this spoken word poetry group to learning in school.
  - How are they similar?
  - Different?
  - What [group] experiences and learning have helped you at school?
  - What school experiences and learning have helped you here?
  - What can schools do to better support writers like you?
  - What can [the group] do to better support your success in school?
4. How did you find out about [this group]?
5. What do you like about [this spoken word poetry group]?
6. I would like for you to comment on some of my observations of [the group] so far:
  - Mentoring (support)
  - Connections to the outside world (reach)
  - Safe space (community)
  - Music (tool)

### **Changes Attributed to Participation in the Group**

7. Which features of [this spoken word poetry group] are the most important for helping teenagers improve at spoken word poetry?
8. Think back to when you first joined. How has [this group] changed you as a person?
9. How has it changed your writing?
10. What changes have you noticed in each other? Let’s discuss one of you at a time.
11. What do your friends and family members say about your participation in [this group]?
  - What changes have they noticed in you?

### **How Adolescents View Themselves and Their Writing**

12. What does it take to be a great spoken word poet?
- \* Is there anything else you would like to tell me about [the spoken word poetry group]?
- \* (Follow-up questions from data analysis, if necessary.)

### **Adolescent Interview #3: “The Stories Behind the Writing”**

#### **How Adolescents View Themselves and Their Writing**

1. Tell me about the first poem you brought with you today.
    - What is it?
    - When did you write it?
    - Why did you write it?
    - What audience did you imagine?
    - What are you proud of?
    - Explain any challenges you faced.
  2. How does this poem fit with other writing you have done? Is it typical/atypical of your other work?
  3. How did you write this poem?
    - Process?
    - Tools?
    - Help from the group?
  4. Where does this poem show hints of the writer behind it?
  5. Let’s view your performance of this piece. As we do so, I want you to stop the video periodically and explain what is going on. Have you watched movie commentaries where directors, actors, or writers comment on their film while it’s playing? They give some background explaining what went into the making of the film—the stories behind the work that viewers might not know otherwise. Our process today will work sort of like that, but you can pause the video and talk for a while.
  6. Tell me about the second poem you brought with you today.
    - What is it?
    - When did you write it?
    - Why did you write it?
    - What audience did you imagine?
    - What are you proud of?
    - Explain any challenges you faced.
  7. How does it fit with other writing you have done? Is it typical/atypical of your other work?
  8. How did you write this piece?
    - Process?
    - Tools?
    - Help from the group?
  9. Where does this poem show hints of the writer behind it?
  10. Let’s view your performance of this piece. Pause the video to insert commentary.
  11. How are these two works similar or different?
- \* Is there anything else you would like to tell me about these two pieces?
- \* (Follow-up questions from data analysis, as needed.)

### **Participant Information Form**

Preferred Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of time in this group: \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months

Occupation(s) of Parent(s)/Guardian(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Home Language (circle): English / Spanish / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade in English class last semester (circle): A / B / C / D / F Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you have any experiences with spoken word poetry **before** joining this group?

Explain.

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Give some **background** about yourself. Hobbies? Interests? How would others describe you?

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**Please complete this section at the END of the study (Summer 2014)**

How have you **changed** through your involvement in this spoken word poetry group? Be sure to bring me up to date on changes that have happened since our last interview.

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APPENDIX B

FINDINGS

## **Breakdown of Findings**

1. What are the characteristics and practices of Young Voices Rise (YVR), a group of spoken word poets in the urban Southwest?

- **Routines and Practices**
  - Poetry Slams
    - Warming Up Crowd
    - Judging and Responding to Judges
    - Opening Poem(s)
  - Writing Workshops
    - Mentor Text Activities
    - Learning Names
    - Language Review Activities
  - Announcements
- **Forms of Participation**
  - Transactional Participants
    - University Partnerships
    - Guest Poets
  - Core Group
  - School Clubs
  - Occasional Participants
  - Active Participants
  - Peripheral Participants – Novices
  - Roles
- **Support and Encouragement**
  - Poem Feedback
  - Advice
  - Mentoring
- **Sense of Community**
  - People at Slams
  - People at Workshops
- **Spaces & Contexts**
  - Contexts for Slams
  - Contexts for Workshops
  - Safe Space
- **Tools**
  - Music
- **Purposes and Goals**
  - Share Voices
  - Sharpen Writing Skills
  - Competition
  - Caring Citizens of the World
  - Group as Own Entity
- **Comparisons to School**
  - Suggestions for Schools

- Differences
  - Similarities
  - YVR Transfer to Schools
  - School Transfer to YVR
  - Overlaps Observed in Teaching Technique
  - Suggestions for YVR
  - **Trajectories**
    - Outbound Trajectories
    - Inbound Trajectories
    - Insider Trajectories
  - **Global SWP Community – Brave New Voices**
  - **Challenges**
    - Dealing with Growth
    - Getting Space for Events
    - Funding
  - **Boundaries and Brokering**
  - **History**
  - **Perceived Benefits of SWP**
  - **Rules**
2. How do adolescent members of this group view their writing and themselves as writers?
- **Discussions of Poems**
    - When Poem Was Written
    - Performance and Gestures
    - Poet's Presence in the Poem
    - Purpose for Writing
    - How Poem Fits Within Other Work
    - Help Received
    - Process for the Poem
    - Tools Used for Poem
    - Background – Historical, Cultural, Personal
    - Artistic Decisions
    - Audience for Poem
    - Challenges Faced
    - What the Poet Is Proud of in the Poem
    - Comparisons of Two Poems
  - **Writing Practices and Preferences**
    - Preferred Forms
    - Preferred Tools
    - Preferred Time of Day
    - Preferences about Writing with Others
    - Preferred Frequency
    - Preferred Place
    - Preferred Topics

- Writing Dislikes
  - **Supporters – Sponsors**
  - **Writing History**
    - Elementary School
    - Middle School
  - **Feelings about Self as Writer**
  - **Writing Motivation**
  - **Writing Role Models**
  - **Writing Identity**
  - **Powerful Experiences**
  - **Sense of Time When Writing**
  - **Writing Challenges**
  - **Writing Future**
  - **Notions of Expertise**
3. What changes—personal or writing-related—do adolescent writers attribute to their experiences in YVR? What changes have others (i.e., fellow adolescent members, teaching artists, the researcher) noticed in these writers?
- **Changes Grouped by Participant**
  - **Personal Changes**
    - Confidence
    - Maturity
    - Social Skills
    - Leadership
    - Trust and Vulnerability
    - Healing
    - Empathy
  - **Writing-Related Changes**
    - Poetic Devices
    - Editing and Grammar
    - Performance
    - Organization
    - Topics and Depth
      - Addressing Social Issues
      - Emotional Pieces
  - **Changes in Other Areas**
    - Reading
    - Art
    - School
  - **Perceived Impact of YVR on Writing**

## “Safe Space” Word Tree (Generated through NVivo)



